

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

**Grace-Based Faith Discipleship Approach of Adults in South Rock Christian Church:
Addressing the Contemporary Legalistic Lifestyle of Disciples**

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to
the Faculty of the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Thesis Project Approval Sheet

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Discipleship often evokes different responses. However, contemporary Christians have a faithfulness dilemma driven by the constant messages they hear. This DMIN project seeks to develop and promote a ministry structure that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian life based on God's grace. The project seeks to provide a framework for participants to be transformed holistically by God's grace. Often, the members of South Rock Christian Church understand grace as the entry point into salvation, but not the identifying trait of their faithful life in Christ. This action project consists of qualitative research that demonstrates a gap between belief and action in its participants. Therefore, this project will explore the breakdown of what the disciple believes and what they put into action. It also consists of qualitative research which entails a six-week Participation Group examining the identity marks of a disciple. The research promotes a grace-based discipleship approach that demonstrates God's grace as His transformative presence in the disciple's life. The approach will combat the lies that disciples believe about God, self, and others. The results of the research show that the discipleship problem at South Rock Christian Church is not a belief problem, but one that is not based on God's grace. The research confirms the reality of a contemporary legalistic lifestyle. Therefore, this DMIN project seeks to provide a fresh approach to the church's discipleship efforts that are based on God's grace rather than on human achievement.

Keywords: discipleship, evangelism, faithfulness, grace, legalism.

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Abbreviations

DMIN	<i>Doctor of Ministry</i>
GBDA	<i>Grace-based Discipleship Approach</i>
PG	<i>Participation Group</i>
PGS	<i>Participation Group Survey</i>
SRCC	<i>South Rock Christian Church</i>

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The decline in the Protestant church involves a numeric decrease, but the drop in numbers tells a bigger story.¹ Membership and baptism numbers have fallen since 1990, indicating a quantitative and qualitative decline concerning church members.² The quality of Protestant church members is the concern here. Spiritual development is the identifying mark of qualitative progress. Therefore, the qualitative decline is related to the waning numbers of Protestant church engagement. Church growth is affected by the lack of Protestant church members' spiritual growth in obeying the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 – 20.³ Despite the growing number of discipleship strategies, plans, and visions, the Protestant church continues to experience discipleship difficulties.⁴ This means the primary issue is not necessarily an outreach problem but a spiritual development problem.

¹ I.W. Ferreira and W. Chipenyu, "Church Decline: A Comparative Investigation Assessing More than Numbers," *In die Skriflig* 55, no. 1 (January 2021), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Andrew Hayes and Stephen Cherry, eds., *The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now* (London: SCM Press, 2021). Contributors provide a comprehensive history of the meaning of "disciple," "discipling," and "discipleship" up through the contemporary church. Hayes and Cherry's contribution is most helpful in describing discipleship as a contemporary application of identity connected to Christ against one shaped by the world in "intentional and directive formational influence" in the "long-term shaping of individuals and communities, in detail and at depth" by which faith in Jesus Christ "is to be lived out" in the whole life of the believer: Stephen Cherry and Andrew Hayes, "The Authenticity of Discipleship," in *The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now*, ed. Andrew Hayes and Stephen Cherry (London: SCM Press, 2021), 326 – 328.

The membership and attendance of South Rock Christian Church in Derby, KS, continues to increase, attendance in children's and youth programming reaches more and more students, and worship attendance becomes more populated; however, the members at South Rock encounter spiritual development issues as it relates to its participation in the Great Commission.⁵ Torey Teer claims that this is an ontological issue facing the church.⁶ In effect, the church growth problem results from a lack of understanding of church member identity as it relates to Jesus' divine missional directive for the collective church. Therefore, this research seeks to address the spiritual identity of South Rock Christian Church members.

Ministry Context

South Rock Christian Church is a non-denominational, independent Christian church. This means that they claim to adhere to no other authority except that which the Scriptures empower (1 Tim 3:16 – 17; 4:2). The structure of the church consists of nine full-time ministerial staff (Lead Minister, Teaching Minister, Family and Counseling Minister, Outreach Minister, Worship Minister, Community Minister, Youth Minister, Children's Minister, and Associate Children's/Worship Minister), four administrative assistants, business manager, pre-school director, five pre-school teachers, and six support staff. In addition, the church is overseen by four elders and served by eighteen deacons.

Currently, South Rock hosts three worship services, one on Saturday night and two on Sunday morning. Congruent with each service is a youth ministry during the first Sunday service for sixth through twelfth grade, children's ministry classes and gatherings for each service, and

⁵ John F. Hoffmeyer, "The Missional Trinity," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40, no. 2 (Summer, 2001), 111.

⁶ Torey Teer, "As the Father Has Sent Me, Even So I am Sending You: The Divine Missions and the Mission of the Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 63, no. 3 (September, 2020), 535 – 536.

three classes for adults on Sunday mornings. In addition, various adult classes and small groups (life groups) meet at the church and in homes throughout the week. Seventeen groups and classes are offered for adults throughout the week. As of the writing of this project, the average worship service attendance is 1,130, with 214 adults connected to one of the groups or classes. In addition, 230 men and women participate in some fashion with the men's and women's ministries that meet throughout the year.

South Rock Christian Church (SRCC) was founded in 1955 as the First Christian Church in Derby, KS. The few founding families desired to gather without denominational oversight but wanted to adhere to the Word of God. They began meeting with the goal of recruiting fifty people in the first fifty days. After hitting their goal, the church was established and has served in Derby ever since. The last 68 years have seen many changes. SRCC has experienced many different preachers and several different types of ministries. All of which are an attempt to obey the Great Commission as their calling.

South Rock Christian Church's primary ministry is in Derby, KS, about five miles south of Wichita. Derby's population is 26,000, with a growth rate of 1.32 percent annually. The average household income is \$74,427, with the population consisting primarily of Caucasians (88 percent). The average age of its residents is 35.6 years old, with 17,600 adults (3,600 are senior citizens).⁷ Derby consists of one high school (2,185 attendance), two middle schools, nine elementary schools, and two private elementary schools.⁸

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, *Derby, KS*, last modified 2022, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/derbycitykansas/LND110210>.

⁸ Public School Review, *Derby School District*, last modified January 2023, <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/kansas/derby-school-district/2005460-school-district/high>.

While most of the church members of SRCC are Derby residents, SRCC is also attended by residents from the bordering towns of Mulvane, Rose Hill, Haysville, and Southern Wichita. Some even participate from as far away as Winfield and Udall. As of March 2020, SRCC also hosts an online service that is watched weekly by an average of 335.

Though the church has experienced many facility changes throughout the years, the most significant happened in 2013 with the building of its current structure two miles away from the previous building. Along with the new church building came the new name that best describes its location: South Rock Christian Church. SRCC maintains ownership of the previous building for various outreach ministries such as middle school and high school programs, sports leagues, men's and women's meetings, and homeschool gymnasiums.

The mission of SRCC is "To Help People Find and Follow Jesus," and they teach this mission in connection to the Great Commandment (Mark 12:30 – 31) and the Great Commission (Matt 28:18 – 20). Their top priorities are the proclamation and the teaching of God's saving message of Jesus Christ. Therefore, discipleship efforts should result in "everyone being a minister." This ministry focuses on two groups: the lost (do not claim Jesus as Lord and Savior) and those not connected to a local church body.

SRCC's Statement of Faith is this:

We believe in one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit; We believe God is the creator of all things; We believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son and Savior of the world; We believe in the Holy Spirit, who every believer receives at conversion; We accept the Bible as the final authority for all matters of faith and practice; We believe that man, created by God, willfully sinned and, as a result, is lost and without hope apart from Jesus Christ; We believe that salvation - the forgiveness of sins - comes by grace through the blood of Jesus Christ; We believe the Bible teaches that the pattern to receive Christ as Savior is to believe in Christ as God's Son and Savior of the world, to repent of personal sin, to confess Christ publicly, and to be immersed in water baptism; We believe that the church, the body and bride of Christ, was founded on the day of Pentecost, and consists of all Christians worldwide; We believe that God has ordained elders to exercise spiritual

leadership and authority over this church; We believe Christ followers are given spiritual gifts to minister to others.⁹

From this Statement of Faith come five values instructed to leadership to empower to fulfill the mission of SRCC: People, The Bible, Authenticity/Transparency, Maturity, and Prayer. The expectation of church membership is to uphold those values through worship attendance, connection in a smaller fellowship experience, serving in at least one of a variety of opportunities, and agreeing with the SRCC covenant, which states: "I will protect the unity of SRCC...share the responsibility of SRCC...serve in the ministry of SRCC...and support the testimony of SRCC."¹⁰

Recently, SRCC has experienced significant ministerial staff changes. The Children's Minister was hired to replace the previous Children's Minister, who was on staff for over a decade. Just after that, the Lead Minister resigned due to a moral incident. He was on staff for more than eighteen years. He was replaced by a minister already on staff, creating a void in the Youth Minister position. That void was filled a year later, along with the addition of the Associate Children's/Worship Minister.

The sudden loss of the Lead Minister in 2021 coincided with a large church plant in Derby, resulting in staff changes, membership movements, and overall experiences of confusion and grief. The church has had to negotiate and recollect herself through many recent toils. Believing that SRCC is past much of these recent issues, the church leadership believes now is the time to evaluate and implement sufficient spiritual growth ministries.

⁹ South Rock Christian Church, "Who We Are," New Here?, accessed April 18, 2023, <https://southrock.cc/new-here/>

¹⁰ South Rock Christian Church. *Membership Covenant* (SRCC, November 11, 2015) Pamphlet.

Problem Presented

South Rock Christian Church of Derby, KS, intends to help its people find and follow Jesus. The primary ministry utilized to achieve this mission is through the preaching and worship experience. Attendance in worship services is increasing, though it has not reached pre-COVID-19 numbers. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, average attendance was 1,376, with the largest non-holiday weekend peaking at 1,453 on February 23, 2020. SRCC reopened its doors for in-person gatherings on June 21, 2020, with 656 people in attendance. During that time, SRCC created an online service that continues to run. Average attendance post-COVID-19 is now 1,140, including two Sunday morning services, one Saturday night service, and online. Connected to this are children's, youth, and small group ministries for adults. However, not all members of South Rock participate in the small group ministry. Only 19 percent of worship service attendees join in small group ministry. Often, small groups are presented as an extra experience or a Bible study rather than a discipleship method designed to be a vehicle for spiritual formation. Thus, a lack of participation in groups is a result.

More than this, the gospel lifestyle is lived through good works and human effort, despite attempts of the church to teach differently from the pulpit. Modern legalism ensues, and guilt can be a motivator. In many cases, works are assumed to be how a disciple can find emotional, mental, and spiritual healing. This is not the desired effect of SRCC or the spiritual life described in the New Testament (Rom 5:5; 2 Cor 5:21; Eph 2:8 – 10). At the core, the members of South Rock have a faithfulness concern. This is not an issue of agreeing to the propositions of the New Testament but of living a lifestyle based on God's grace. In essence, the Christian lifestyle of the SRCC member tends to look like this: if they do the right things, they can believe the right things. It is an upside-down gospel that hopes to result in the reception of God's grace rather than

leading a life from the Father's undeserved favor. When that does not work, the SRCC member is frustrated at best, and at worst, they leave the flock altogether.

At the first sign of spiritual adversity, flight overtakes fight as the response, hoping that the proper actions will lead to emotional health and balance. The right emotional experience will lead to correct thinking about life and God, and SRCC adults wish to experience meaningful discipleship. The problem in the South Rock Christian Church adult ministry is that participants struggle to live a lifestyle based on God's grace.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to implement a ministry structure that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian life based on God's grace. Rather than reducing discipleship efforts to Bible study or service only, this DMIN research seeks to provide a framework for participants to be transformed holistically by God's grace. Instead of working to earn God's grace, this ministry will help members work from the gift of God.

The ministry intends to help SRCC adults identify spiritual adversaries that work against them. Commenting on Augustine, Christopher Holmes teaches that the adverse work against believers is not the effect of God but on the believer by the self, the patterns of the world, and the devil. He says, "The more we are like God, the more we participate in God, and the more we do what is good."¹¹ If true, faith(fulness) precedes doing right and obeying God's divine mission. This project intends to help the adults of South Rock to work from God's righteous grace and not to earn or arrive at it.

¹¹ Christopher R. J. Holmes, *A Theology of the Christian Life: Imitating and Participating in God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 93.

To accomplish this purpose, the research project must demonstrate how contemporary legalism is founded on lies. Then, the ministry will help explain what the truth is that combats these lies. Upon this foundation, the intention is that this research project will be able to educate, equip, and enrich the spiritual development of South Rock's adult members.

Basic Assumptions

Discipleship often evokes different responses. However, contemporary Christians have a faithfulness dilemma driven by the constant messages they hear, most of which are lies about themselves, others, and God.¹² This project seeks to promote ministry that aids in identifying those lies and establishing the truth that combats those lies through meaningful spiritual formation ministry programming.

The first assumption is that unhealthy spirituality results from a person believing lies about God, even if they do not intend to do so. The Apostle Paul says, "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Rom 1:25, English Standard Version). This partly creates the problem this project seeks to address.

Another assumption is that the unhealthy spirituality of SRCC adults results from believing lies concerning others. The project will assume that the problem could be that individuals do not view other people the same way God may view them; thus, they are not walking in obedience to the Lord or understanding His grace (2 Cor 5:16).

The project also assumes that lies about the self may impede the participant's spiritual walk. There is the possibility that trauma has been caused by other people or extenuating circumstances outside the control of the individual participant. This hurt and grief could impede

¹² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Here Are Your Gods: Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Situations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 109.

the individual's spiritual formation process, causing shame, guilt, inadequacy, or various damaging scenarios that work against discipleship efforts.

This research project also assumes the desire to know Jesus intimately and live out of one's faithfulness to Jesus. Therefore, it is not a project that seeks conversion as the primary ministry but assumes the participant is converted to a life of faith in and on Jesus Christ. Thus, this project aims to address a discipleship ministry that helps SRCC adult members follow Jesus in God's grace.

Definitions

Contemporary legalism is the problem primarily concerned with the discipleship ministry of South Rock Christian Church in Derby, KS. As SRCC's mission to "help people find and follow Jesus" is pursued, several terms are used frequently, some are used occasionally, and others rarely, if at all. The key terms used in this project include discipleship, evangelism, legalism, freedom, and others that are relevant to the thesis of this action research project. Some of these terms can and will be used interchangeably. In addition, some of these terms will be used generally, while others describe a specific aspect of this project.

Acceptance. This term should be understood in its theological context rather than merely a behavioral one. McGee describes it relating to a change in behavior as a spiritual work that "requires a release from our old self-concept, which is often founded in failure and expectations of others" with the need to "relate ourselves in a new way" that bases the self "on God's opinion of us and trust in His Spirit to accomplish change in our lives."¹³

¹³ Robert S. McGee, *The Search for Significance: Seeing Your True Worth in God's Eyes* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 106.

Antinominalism. This is a term that was initially used in connection with “antinomist,” “libertine,” and “familist.” It was originally used derisively for polemical purposes to describe those considered heretics.¹⁴ One of its first uses was in a debate between Philip Melanchthon and Johannes Agricola in the 1530s, in which Agricola rejected any role of the law. Melanchthon accused him of being “antinomian” (*anti* = against; *nomos* = law).¹⁵ Ultimately, it became a way of thinking that denies the role of the law in the Christian life that finds its basis in Romans 6:14.¹⁶

Discipleship. Much of the ministry and mission of SRCC separate discipleship ministries (“following” Jesus) and evangelism ministries (“finding” Jesus). The danger in this is to portray the Commission of making disciples (Matt 28:19) differently than reaching those who do not place faith in the Christian gospel (evangelism). This project will contend that discipleship and evangelism are closely related activities of faithful Christ-followers and should not be considered separate missions. Just as evangelistic efforts are not strictly a preaching activity, discipleship is not strictly an educational one. Gorman describes the discipleship process aptly as “The mode by which salvation is conveyed...and the mode by which salvation is received by faith...as in the sense of full participation,” resulting in “a comprehensive transformation of conviction, character, and communal affiliation.”¹⁷

Evangelism. Numerous authors, scholars, academics, and church clergy and laity have contributed to descriptions of evangelism. However, this project speaks of evangelism more

¹⁴ David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 33.

¹⁵ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, & Gospel Assurance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁷ Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 23.

comprehensively than the salvation plan. McKnight provides the basis for defining evangelism when he conveys the activity as more than talking about Jesus and telling others about him.¹⁸ Instead, he expresses evangelism as efforts of a gospel culture that emerges in four ways: first, as disciples become the people of the gospel story; second, as those disciples immerse even more into the gospel story; third, that immersion seeks to take the story of Jesus into the next generation and different cultures; and, finally, embracing the gospel story into a salvation way of life.¹⁹

Freedom. Freedom is a term that carries an enormous amount of weight depending upon the context in which it is being used. For this project, freedom will be viewed as a spiritual matter. Bartholomew and Goheen define freedom as the way “to be fully human,” which means to have freedom and responsibility “to respond to God and to be held accountable for that response.” This results in God’s people becoming “God’s royal stewards.”²⁰

Grace. Barclay states grace is “a gift given to a favored person that creates gratitude in return.”²¹ The two-pronged understanding must go further, however. Not only is grace a gift that is given, which produces gratitude, but it finds its object in the person of Jesus Christ: “We need to observe that Christ, the object of our faith, is God’s gift of grace to us.”²² Grace is understood as God’s gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, which produces a new life committed to Him.

¹⁸ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 169 – 175.

²⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 34.

²¹ John M. G. Barclay, *Paul & the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 2.

²² Kevin W. McFadden, *Faith in the Son of God: The Place of Faith within Pauline Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 249.

In Christ. Paul's writings used "in Christ" as a theological term at least 143 times (along with its variants).²³ Gorman provides a working definition that fits this project. He understands "in Christ" language in tandem with "Christ within" terminology. Therefore, to be in Christ is to base one's life on "the resurrected crucified Messiah who lives within believers, both individually and, especially, corporately."²⁴

Legalism. A way of practicing one's faith that attempts to earn one's salvation by doing good works. Initially, legalism concerned the first church's acceptance in terms of obedience to the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1). Contemporary legalism is "simply separating the law of God from the person of God...rooted not merely in our view of law as such but in a distorted view of God as the giver of his law."²⁵ In this respect, legalism relates to this project as a potential for exchanging God's truth for a lie.

Love. It is used widely for various meanings, especially in popular culture. How love concerns this project is in the act of discipleship ministry. Love is an expression of the work of the cross and, indeed, the person of Jesus Christ that results in regeneration.²⁶ Konstan, then, defines love as "a disposition accompanying the emotion (of love)...a trust in those whom we like and whom we have reason to believe love us."²⁷

Ordo Salutis. A Reformation term to denote the application of the redemption process. It answers how the various aspects of redemption are applied and related. It means "the orderly

²³ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 45.

²⁴ Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 29.

²⁵ Ferguson, *The Whole of Christ*, 83.

²⁶ Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 71.

²⁷ David Konstan, "Trusting in Jesus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 40, no. 3 (March, 2018), 252.

arrangement of the various aspects of salvation in its bestowal on men and women.”²⁸ It is concerned with the logic embedded in the understanding of the way the Holy Spirit works on the individual believer.

Security. Kinnaman and Matlock discuss spiritual and religious psychological security as expressing intimacy with God and experiencing conversational intimacy with Jesus.²⁹ Security is finding one’s identity solidified by one’s faith in Christ. It is used synonymously with “certainty.” Though expressions of absolute certainty can betray true confidence, spiritual security is connected to a “simple mental state of being supremely confident in the truth of a proposition.”³⁰

Self-Worth, Worth. This is how one thinks of oneself based on what one believes.³¹ In spiritual formation, worth is a concept that “contains both strength and humility, both sorrow over sin and joy about forgiveness, a deep sense of our need for God’s grace and a deep sense of the reality of God’s grace.”³² The driving element within the human essence is applied to the experience of significance in one’s life.³³

Limitations

As SRCC continues its mission to “help people find and follow Jesus,” discipleship and spiritual formation ministries become increasingly urgent. This project will focus on the spiritual formation of adult participants at SRCC. However, challenges arise against spiritual formation

²⁸ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 75.

²⁹ David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 43.

³⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 97.

³¹ McGee, *The Search for Significance*, 20.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

³³ *Ibid.*

ministries within SRCC as this project seeks to eliminate discipleship as a hobby and replace it with a vital ministry among its members. For instance, many ministries are already occurring with SRCC, and addressing discipleship issues might be viewed as another option in the long list of events and programs. Furthermore, discipleship is mainly considered an educational endeavor rather than the believer's lifestyle. Therefore, participation may be limited when added to the many other extracurricular activities within and outside the church that compete for the SRCC members' time.

The project will solely focus on adults who have graduated from the church's elementary, middle, and high school programs. This fits within the scope of the researcher's ministry. Also, SRCC already has ministries dedicated to children and youth. To apply this project to all ages would be too broad, and the desired goal may not be accomplished. However, the outcome of this project may be worth evaluating and applying to other age groups. Due to the broad need for a focused discipleship ministry, the different life stages of adults participating in SRCC's mission will vary greatly. They will all have various religious and church backgrounds impacting their participation in this project.

The project is limited in focus on ministry performed within South Rock Christian Church. Many approaches may be deemed valid and valuable. Still, this project will focus specifically on transforming a life based on one's good works to a life focused on the redeeming work of the gospel.

This project is concerned with the context of discipleship ministry within the SRCC ministry context. While it will involve the Christian educational experience, it will not intend to focus strictly on teaching. Instead, it will focus on believing adults' lives worked out from their faith in Jesus Christ.

Delimitations

This project concerns adult discipleship at South Rock Christian Church in Derby, KS. Therefore, the first delimitation will be that it intends to address adults eighteen years and older who have moved on from high school ministry programs. It does not deny the necessity of student discipleship programs but focuses on those connected to SRCC as adults.

Another delimitation is that the research will focus on SRCC. It is not intended as a one-size-fits-all discipleship method across many church contexts. However, many principles may apply to other local bodies within their ministry context.

The research will be delimited to self-professing Christians who desire to live out their faith as disciples of Jesus within the ministry context of SRCC. Self-professing will include an agreement that they believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and their Lord and Savior. Therefore, the research is not necessarily for church attendees but for those who agree with the discipleship way of life.

Finally, the project will be delimited to a specific discipleship and spiritual formation model at the cost of implementing other models that may or may not have a proven record. This way, SRCC will develop its identity as the church attempts to fulfill its mission.

Thesis Statement

Many spiritual blocks South Rock Christian Church members encounter are experienced from lie-based living. The thrust of the discipleship issues that South Rock encounters are both as individuals and as a collective body. Individually, addressing SRCC members' gospel lifestyle is prudent. Examination and evaluation of adherence to the gospel over fidelity to a works-based lifestyle are crucial. This means that this theological error needs to be corrected. What they

believe and understand about God, the self, and others requires educational teaching and training that results in an inspiring and developing spiritual life.

It is not just an individual matter, however. South Rock also encounters participation in discipleship issues, as well. While SRCC values and attempts to teach every member-a-minister philosophy, there are significant gaps in the practice of discipleship and the teachings of the topic. While work and services are done, the primary motivation is that somebody needs to do them, or no one else will, resulting in guilt-based service. Instead, this project hopes to result in a ministry that leads its members to work from the love, acceptance, worthiness, and security of the resurrection of Christ. Discipleship should result as participants discover life in Christ.

Ministry should enable participants to biblically understand who they are, who others are, and who God is. The topic of concern is biblical identity, both for the individual and the believing community. When the faith-life of South Rock Christian Church members is rooted in God's work through Jesus Christ, minds will be renewed. Then, emotional experiences and actions will follow suit. Spiritual lives will no longer depend solely on legalistic activity but will be built from the gospel of Jesus. If an educational ministry that equips and enriches the Christian lifestyle in God's grace is implemented and leads to gospel-based obedience, then the spiritual life of South Rock will flourish.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Literature covering faith and grace is vast. Narrowing the literature down to the problem at South Rock is critical. Specific to SRCC are issues concerning works and faith. Since the goal is to work from faith and not toward it, the following literature review is significant in evaluating the current framework for the contemporary church. This review will produce a theological understanding with the goal of aligning the spiritual lives of the members of South Rock with the Word of God.

Literature Review

Faith in Jesus is not just an agreement with certain truths about Him; it is the life of a disciple that is more than an academic alignment with the preacher or even with Christ Himself.¹ Faith must be practiced. Faith is more than just a few practices and habits; it is a lifestyle. Many theologians have written on this concept, but recent theological, missiological, and biblical scholarship has renewed efforts to the faith-lifestyle of the church.² This literature review covers the topics of participatory faith, the believer's identity, discipleship and psychology, covenant faith, and the church's faith lifestyle.

Participatory Faith

There has been much said in recent scholarship concerning participatory faith. Theologian Klyne Snodgrass believes participation is more than a reclamation of the Christian

¹ McFadden, *Faith in the Son of God*, 243.

² Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 2.

faith but a prognosis for contemporary Christianity's lack of a vibrant spiritual life. He argues that the church has succumbed to a gospel that is no gospel at all. This is a reality if the church does not recognize the good news that God actively participates relationally with mankind, specifically and especially through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and continues through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The cure is a better gospel.³ This “better gospel” is not a mere activity, however. It is participation with Christ, specifically in His death and resurrection.⁴ Kierkegaard calls this the difference between being an admirer of Christ and an imitator of Him.⁵ Participation with Christ must go beyond church attendance and find life relationally tied to Jesus Christ.

Snodgrass is one of many scholars to address this issue recently. Jeanette Pifer also argues for the Christian faith to be a participatory lifestyle. Her position is that participatory faith is living in the kingdom of God. This is what she calls “present participation in Christ’s resurrection.”⁶ For Pifer, the call for participation in Christ is primarily a theological exercise that results in an active lifestyle that is reflective of the gospel. Proper participation in Christ results from the exemplary exposition of faith in the Scriptures.⁷ Modern scholarship refocuses on the activity of the one who claims faith in Christ.

³ Klyne R. Snodgrass, *You Need a Better Gospel: Reclaiming the Good News of Participation with Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 163.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, “From on High He Will Draw All to Himself: Christian Expositions.” In *Kierkegaard’s Writings, XX, Volume 20: Practice in Christianity*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1991), 237. Snodgrass notes that Kierkegaard's problems were not the same as the contemporary Church's because of cultural differences in embracing Christianity. However, his solution to finding followership of Christ in the biblical message resonates with participating in the faith. In essence, Kierkegaard's "being contemporaneous with Christ" is taking faith seriously by recognizing and living in the impact of the presence of Christ in the life of the believer.

⁶ Jeanette Hagen Pifer, *Faith as Participation: An Exegetical Study of Some Key Pauline Texts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

A particular strength in Pifer's work is that she calls for the church to reclaim a historical focus on participatory faith instead of a rethinking of faith. Worthy of note, she shows the reader how historical theologians also petitioned for the believer to participate actively. For example, Luther's theology demonstrates that belief is a precondition of "doing with faith."⁸ Similarly, Schlatter did not approach faith as elevated agreement and expectation for future eternity. Instead, his theological perspective connected the believer's life to the resurrection of Jesus.⁹ Pifer demonstrates that the biblical and historical understanding of faith is beyond the foundational acquiring of knowledge, but a dynamic and active participatory lifestyle that is self-involving in the salvation process of Christ-mediating.¹⁰

Traditionally, faith in the New Testament has been understood as belief or trust.¹¹ However, belief or trust has morphed into a cerebral exercise. Etymologist David Konstan studies the development of words like "trust," "believe," and "faith." Of this development, he shows that in classic literature, belief is not an inward act but rather one that places trust in another agent that proves their trustworthiness.¹² There is an association between *pistis* and *metanoia* that he sums up this way:

Since God is regarded as both loving and implicitly trustworthy, human beings are expected to reciprocate with confidence in God or, in the New Testament, in Christ, and faith in this sense, that is, trust in his goodwill and constancy, is the mark of those who have recognized his divinity and so a sign of their conversion – hence the association between *pistis* and *metanoia*.¹³

⁸ Pifer, *Faith as Participation*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹¹ Konstan, "Trusting in Jesus," 249.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 251 – 252.

Konstan demonstrates that *pistis* and *metanoia* mark the point of conversion, as *pistis* is a recognition of Christ's divinity, while *metanoia* is a sign of response to one's conversion. For Konstan, the association of the two is that *pistis* leads to *metanoia*.¹⁴ When understood in these terms, the faith of the disciple of Jesus is an interaction between the believer and Christ, who understand one another's actions and respond to them. Knowledge, by itself, does not accomplish anything. Instead, knowledge must be put into action with vigor. This strength is empowered by the activity of Christ in the believer's life.¹⁵ In this sense, faith is a relational concept that takes the believer beyond doctrinal agreement and becomes the vehicle for a Christian lifestyle.

As modern scholarship pushes the understanding of faith beyond the intellectual agreement in doctrine, perhaps no other work has been as provocative as Matthew Bates' *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*. Bates seeks to explain biblical teachings such as salvation, faith, works, and gospel adequately.¹⁶ However, he determines that "faith" and "belief" are insufficient interpretations of *pistis* and need to be removed from Christian discourse altogether as terms to describe salvation.¹⁷ Instead, they must be understood as "fidelity" or "allegiance" to Jesus as King.¹⁸ Indeed, it is a far-reaching call with drastic implications for many denominations and the church as a whole, but one that needs to be taken seriously.

For Bates, the discussion is beyond just the meaning of words like *pistis* but also a reconsideration of the gospel of the New Testament altogether. Instead of faith being an

¹⁴ Konstan, "Trusting in Jesus," 253.

¹⁵ Snodgrass, *You Need a Better Gospel*, 164.

¹⁶ Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

evidence-based assessment of truth, he proposes *pistis* to be a response to the gospel, which finds its crucial element in the reign of Jesus as King. Therefore, faith is allegiance to the King.¹⁹ The Christian life finds its meaning and purpose associated with the kingdom of God. It is not as much an assessment of truth propositions as a voyage of dedication to Jesus.

Bates's soteriological and christological claims are crucial for the church and individual Christians' lives.²⁰ His entire chapter 6 is devoted to the soteriological understanding of "embodied transformation" in the new creation order.²¹ This embodied transformation is participation with Jesus in rulership and citizenship that goes beyond the contemporary teaching of salvation, culminating in who and who is not going to heaven.

Not all accept Bates's framework of faith and salvation. Timmins responds to Bates's negative framework of faith, mainly in his "What faith is not" section of chapter two. Bates's description of faith as not being the opposite of works contrasts with his "faith as allegiance" stance.²² Timmins is concerned that Bates is proposing a works-based gospel that diminishes the death of Jesus in light of highlighting the lordship of Christ.²³ Excluding faith as trust in the Lord Jesus is to miss a vital part of the gospel transformation experience.

Timmins is also concerned with Bates's lack of interaction with *euangelion*.²⁴ However, applying Bates's allegiance motif would need to include this practice since it is an act that results from a trust in Christ. Bates's purpose is a reframing exercise to properly understand the gospel

¹⁹ Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 – 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

²² *Ibid.*, 20 – 22.

²³ Will N. Timmins, "A Faith Unlike Abraham's: Matthew Bates on Salvation by Allegiance Along," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 61, no. 3 (2018), 596 – 597.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 599.

so that faith can be adequately defined. The climactic experience of the gospel is in the kingship of Jesus as He sovereignly rules over His people.²⁵ Salvation is found in fidelity to Jesus. It is in this faithfulness to Jesus that the believers find their purpose.

The participatory faith of the believer is not based on human effort. Instead, works are based on the completed work of the Lord Jesus, who imputes His righteousness on the faithful.²⁶ What Bates lacks is that he calls this work a “reframing” rather than a reclamation. Modern scholarship is deeply concerned with bringing Christians back to a devoted lifestyle to Jesus. This requires a proper emptying of the self so that ultimate participation with Christ can occur.²⁷ This is not a new concept but one that theologians have taught for centuries. It also finds its roots in the biblical teachings of the Apostles.

Faith as participation is more than work; it is a lifestyle.²⁸ It is at once a denial of the self and involvement in the resurrected life of Christ.²⁹ More than an agreement to a set of propositional statements, participatory faith embeds itself in obedience to the presence of Christ. It is still true that at its foundational level, factual information is crucial for the element of trustworthiness of the individual.³⁰ Jesus must be trustworthy for an individual to place their trust in Him. However, that trust is more than a belief and entails loyalty to everything He is and obedience to what He has proclaimed.³¹ Participation is what faith requires.

²⁵ Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 77.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁷ Snodgrass, *You Need a Better Gospel*, 169.

²⁸ Pifer, *Faith as Participation*, 219 – 220.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ McFadden, *Faith in the Son of God*, 244.

³¹ Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 98.

At least one gap has been noticed in current scholarship. Susan Mettes identifies a loneliness problem within the church that could work against participatory faith. Although loneliness is diagnosed primarily as a cognitive and sociological disorder, it is also a spiritual one in nature. Mettes admits, “I don’t know where the line falls between the spiritual and the cognitive.”³² She does identify the problem needing more than therapeutic answers. For Mettes, she sees this as a spiritual growth problem. “I believe insecurity always has a spiritual aspect to it – and that security has a spiritual source: our security in Christ.”³³ This project seeks to address the gap between the sociological and spiritual, as identified by Mettes.

The Believer’s Identity

Any discussion that addresses the believer’s lifestyle is fundamentally a conversation about the identity of a Christian. At its core, a believer’s identity is understood structurally and fundamentally as a relationship with God.³⁴ This is true both for the individual and the believing community. Yahweh’s core identity understands that the function of that relationship is as “God” and individuals who make up the context as a group known as “people.”³⁵ God is God who dwells and interacts with His people.

The relationship is an agreement that involves reciprocity. Boda sums it up this way: “At its core, this relational agreement involves reciprocity...a clear declaration of the identity of the two partners in this relationship: God and people...There are responsibilities for both partners in

³² Susan Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic: Why So Many of Us Feel Alone and How Leaders Can Respond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 78.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁴ Mark J. Boda, *The Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology: Three Creedal Expressions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 56.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

this reciprocal relationship.”³⁶ This is a result of a faithful lifestyle. Those who profess the Christian faith do so through a lifestyle of reciprocity to God as His people.

The identity of this relationship is not done in a vacuum, however. There is a context in which God is God, and His people live with Him. In other words, faith or a participatory lifestyle is meaningful: “Faith is a framework of meaning before it is a collection of discrete, easy-to-articulate beliefs.”³⁷ Bailey’s work demonstrates the influence of the culture on the local group of believers. Problems arise in the reciprocating relationship, not with God and His position, but with how the local faith communities work out their faithfulness by assuming their cultural forms are what it means to be faithful.

In contrast, all others are believed to be false.³⁸ Syncretism occurs when cultural forms are identified as forms of faith, especially when other faith forms are assumed to be false since they are foreign to the culture one finds oneself in. When syncretism is fully embraced, the faith of the group is misaligned because it is overly identified with the culture, particularly if the faith the group professes calls for a lifestyle that is counter-cultural. Bailey argues that the modern church's syncretistic culture demonstrates a lack of skill to enable the church to have a theological influence in contemporary culture.³⁹ The problem is revealed as tribalism. Work and participation become about the individual or group rather than the relationship between the believer and God. No longer is the believer living a faithful lifestyle by being identified with Christ as much as they are creating an unsustainable Christian subculture.

³⁶ Boda, *Heartbeat of Old Testament Theology*, 62.

³⁷ Justin Ariel Bailey, *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

The work of the Christian from faith in Christ loses its meaning and purpose when the movement of believing people is about faith artifacts rather than identification with God. There has been a movement in scholarship recently that attempts to realign those identified as “faithful” back to the original mission of the believers. The recent call is to study the culture to understand how God sees its ethos so that gospel people can become "agents of redemptive change" over and above condemning voices.⁴⁰ Christian identity is not as much an abandonment of culture as it is an understanding of the reborn identity within the ethos.

For Christian believers to operate in this new identity, they accept certain propositional truths and understandings of the culture in which they live. Christian identity has purpose and meaning. However, this raises more questions. Is there room for doubt in this type of faith? How can one be sure of these truths they now believe and propose? Theology professor Anthony Thiselton posits such questions in his work, *Doubt, Faith, & Certainty*, when he makes this bold observation:

The *contexts* of certainty decisively shape our *concepts* of certainty...Certainty in the context of the Christian faith introduces a context that cannot be reduced to any other context in life. We begin to wonder whether we can speak of certainty as a meaningful concept at all...However, virtually all expressions of absolute certainty betray an attitude of buoyant confidence. This should not lead us to conflate psychological certainty with eidetic certainty. It merely suggests that objective, logical certainty usually also presupposes psychological certainty.⁴¹

Thiselton describes three contexts of certainty within Christian contexts that frame Christian concepts. First is what he calls "pseudocertainty in analytical statements" by showing how many

⁴⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology?” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael Sleasman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 56.

⁴¹ Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty*, 96 – 97.

analytical propositions have the appearance of absolute truth but prove to be empty.⁴² Next, he examines Wittgenstein's provisional book *On Certainty*. He offers a brief critique of Wittgenstein that is helpful because it resets the stage for doubt claims. Thiselton comments on Wittgenstein's work, showing how doubt presupposes certainty. According to Thiselton, "doubt forms a system" and reason for genuine belief.⁴³ Finally, he surveys "reformed epistemology."⁴⁴ Though he reviews a variety of contemporary philosophers, most of his observation is on Plantinga's "defeaters" and primarily with modern work on the problem of evil and suffering.⁴⁵ Doubt and certainty are not mutually exclusive enemies against a believer's identity. For the Christian, doubt can fuel certainty. According to Thiselton, much of this doubt lives in the eschatological tension of the believer's experience in which faith expresses certainty.⁴⁶ Faith, then, is an activity rooted in proposition rather than strictly a collection of belief statements.

Faith is a vehicle, not a destination. Plantinga shows the progression of faith, which is a product of the work of the Holy Spirit and not conceived by humankind. This belief, namely in the work and divinity of Jesus Christ, is developed through divine teaching and results in "special divine activity in the production of the belief."⁴⁷ The identity of the believer cannot result in stagnation. It cannot be strictly defined in a set of faith propositional statements. Instead, it is to be lived out, experienced, and expressed in a relationship with God through the person of Jesus Christ. All Christian identity is irrevocably connected to the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

⁴² Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty*, 110 – 113.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁵ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 92 – 127.

⁴⁶ Thiselton, *Doubt, Faith, and Certainty*, 142.

⁴⁷ Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 59.

Contemporary scholarship has refocused this relationship in terms of the kingdom of God. Bates echoes the consensus when he shows that intellectual agreement is the “first dimension” of the identity of believers. Still, more is required: confession and loyalty to Jesus as the King.⁴⁸ New Testament professor Joshua Jipp provides a thorough work for understanding Paul's royal teaching, which is also helpful in grappling with the New Testament's concept of the kingdom of God. Jipp demonstrates that the kingdom of God is not far off in a distant future but one in which the people of God presently live. Paul uses participatory language rooted in the Bible's teaching of Jesus' identity as both King and representative of His people. In this way, the faithful also share in the divine King's rule.⁴⁹ The essence of Christian believers is found in their relationship and activity with Jesus as the King.

Bates does go further, though, in touting a salvation relationship with Jesus by demonstrating allegiance to the King and life in the kingdom of God beyond intellectual agreement with Him. It is participation within the Spirit-filled body that is united to the righteousness of God and with His church.⁵⁰ He does not intend to address how, but Bates sets out to “casting vision” for the purpose of clarifying theological matters that impede participation in Christ.⁵¹ While this project intends to fill a programming gap within the church, Bates is helpful in pointing out that there is no participation in Christ without joining in “obedient discipleship.”⁵²

⁴⁸ Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 98.

⁴⁹ Joshua W. Jipp, *Christ is King: Paul's Royal Ideology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 149.

⁵⁰ Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 190.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 205 – 207. Bates demonstrates that God is not a holy attendance-taker or a “robotic scanner,” for Bates, allegiance is where personal salvation and discipleship meet. This project intends to address the tension of this intersection.

A believer in Jesus is not only saved from the entanglement of sin but also saved to live with and for Jesus. It is a participation in Christ's royalty.⁵³ There is no union with Christ without His death, burial, and resurrection, but there are also concepts of a new life without Christ's faithfulness, rule, and human faith experienced in Christ.⁵⁴ The believer's identity is found in union with Jesus and is active in His power. It is one of belonging to the Eternal King and is lived out in the reality of His rule. Identity is not about what one does but to whom one belongs. For the Christian believer, it is experienced in allegiant faithfulness to the divinity of Jesus as both King and Savior.

Church, Mission, Worship

The church is the central basis of the operation of the mission of God. Even the order of salvation is not as much a series of progressions an individual must move through as it is a work God does on behalf of His collective people.⁵⁵ The church has both an inward and outward focus. It is a space for spiritual education and a place for which the collective people of God are sent out.

Winfield Bevins calls this dual work "spiritual breathing," in which the mission of God is not just for God but flows from and results in the worship of God.⁵⁶ The work of God is a critical focus in rediscovering the church's purpose. With estimations of 670,000 to 700,000 people walking away from the church each year, it is time to collectively realign church, mission, and

⁵³ Jipp, *Christ is King*, 274.

⁵⁴ Susan G. Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 123.

⁵⁵ Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 172.

⁵⁶ Winfield Bevins, *Liturgical Mission: The Work of the People for the Life of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 5 – 6.

worship focuses.⁵⁷ This is not a new discovery but has been trending for some time. It also means that the church is perhaps one of the largest mission fields in the world.⁵⁸ To accomplish this, modern scholarship calls for the church to return to its origins, but diverse answers are given to achieving this task. Many argue that this divide is sending confusing messages.⁵⁹

The church does not accomplish its mission of making disciples as a way of worshipping God (Matt 20:18 – 20) if it is not unified.⁶⁰ Bevins notes that Wesley’s Quadrilateral⁶¹ was designed to reunite the church in its day, and it is worth looking at again.⁶² In general, the first three of the Quadrilateral are concepts agreed upon by people of faith, but reclaiming its unity will require a return not just to common belief but to a joint mission.⁶³

Theologian Mark Baker discusses a typical progression for those who have grown up in the church who move from the legalism of their youth to a more refined set of issues in the church that they label “Christian maturity.”⁶⁴ Unfortunately, it trades one set of “drawing lines” for another and misses the point. Baker explains that the church must revisit its original discipleship mission by re-centering on the work of Jesus Christ rather than living centered on

⁵⁷ Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 60.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁹ Bevins, *Liturgical Mission*, 114.

⁶⁰ Beth Felker Jones, *Practicing Christian Doctrine: An Introduction to Thinking and Living Theologically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 203.

⁶¹ Albert Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (January, 1985), 9 – 10. Outler identifies the Quadrilateral as Scripture, tradition, reason, and Christian experience. According to Outler, Wesley identified the Scripture as the “pre-eminent norm” that interacts with the other three tenants as “dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture.”

⁶² Bevins, *Liturgical Mission*, 116.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 118 – 119.

⁶⁴ Mark D. Baker, *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community Without Judgmentalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 2 – 3.

“arbitrary lines.”⁶⁵ His approach is not to erase lines or create new ones. Instead, he champions “centered intervention” to explore stories of people in the church community that enable the community to get beyond the surface issue (lines) to an exploration of deeper issues (identity).⁶⁶

Connecting stories to discover and reveal deeper issues is close to the heart of discipleship because it views ethic theology as a gift rather than a goal to be achieved.⁶⁷ The church’s mission is not to supplant a previous set of rules with a new group. Instead, the church is called to exist from and for the love of God that dictates ethical boundaries. In other words, the Christian community is not called to impose a set of rules on the church and call it “Christian.” Instead, discipleship is to discover the love, grace, and mercy dictated by Jesus and His life, death, and resurrection to guide the church to fulfilling its mission.⁶⁸

Bartholomew and Goheen describe this in terms of a drama depicted in Scripture. Within that drama, “Jesus sends his followers out to pursue the same kingdom mission in which he himself is involved. For the disciple community, to be in communion with Jesus means to take active part in his mission.”⁶⁹ There is no such thing as a church that is not a participant in the mission of God to proclaim and bring Jesus to the community at large.

To separate the gospel from the church is to succumb to the temptation to turn the story of God in the world into an account of personal salvation.⁷⁰ “The dominant culture (of biblical

⁶⁵ Baker, *Centered-Set Church*, 13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 160.

⁷⁰ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 62.

salvation) is the gospel culture. And a gospel culture is one shaped by the Story of Israel and the Story of Jesus Christ...It tells the story that Jesus, not any human ruler, is the Lord over all.”⁷¹

Current scholarship concerning the church, discipleship, and worship is mission-centric. Scholars are concerned with revisiting the original *mission Dei* and its connection to the local faith community: “The church is a theological reality. The church is unintelligible apart from God.”⁷² Beyond being an authoritative guide for a faithful proposition, Scripture provides a missional Christology for that theological reality. In this sense, “the church is to become the gospel by participating in it” in an honest and vital corporate endeavor.⁷³

Contemporary Legalism and Grace

Jacques Ellul once described his early experience with the church as witnessing a battle between religion and revelation. Religion, for Ellul, was an upward-moving arrow that perceives human action as the fundamental way God acts toward human beings. In contrast, the grace of God is the downward-moving arrow, which is the fundamental way God lovingly interacts with humanity.⁷⁴ Of this teaching, Baker points out that revelation exposes the religion for what it is worth and calls for the rise of the “non-religious church.”⁷⁵ Ellul and Baker both touch on the tension between legalism and grace.

This is a topic that has been battled for years. Ferguson writes extensively of the “Marrow controversy” that pitted the likes of Thomas Boston and James Hog against many

⁷¹ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 62.

⁷² Holmes, *A Theology of the Christian Life*, 144.

⁷³ Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 109.

⁷⁴ Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1983), 129.

⁷⁵ Baker, *Centered-Set Church*, 87.

leaders of the Church of Scotland led by James Hadow. An ugly debate opposing Hadow and company (legalism) against Boston and Hag (antinomianism) transpired. Though the debate was fierce and unkind, the issue had been bubbling beneath the surface, and the church was finally forced to address it.⁷⁶

Ferguson's historical work highlights that the debate is still alive today. However, to Ferguson's point, the antithesis to legalism is not antinomianism. Instead, grace is the salve that heals the divide.⁷⁷ In Ferguson's theological exposé, the law is interpreted as a gift of God for governance in the relationship between humanity and God. In his understanding, this heightens the severity of grace displayed in Jesus, who not only proclaims the gospel but is, indeed, the gospel itself: "As the perfect embodiment of the moral law of God, Jesus Christ bids us come to him and find rest...He also bids us to be united to him through faith in the power of the Spirit, so that as he places his yoke on our shoulders we hear him say, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The law finds its fulfillment in Christ. The solution to the predicament of the broken law is not a different law. Obedience to the law has never gone away, but the grace of Jesus Christ has completed it.⁷⁸ Baker calls the power of the uncompleted law and those ensnared by it "bounded."⁷⁹ These bounded ways, he says, are the same bounded ways that put Jesus on the cross and that the primary force of legalism is spiritual in nature.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 23 – 36.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷⁸ Crow, *The Path of Faith*, 169.

⁷⁹ Baker, *Centered-Set Church*, 89.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

In his discussion of the freedom (from the law) that is in Christ, Comer discusses contemporary legalism as “negative freedom.”⁸¹ Negative freedom is defined in opposition to constraint. Liberation is determined strictly by the individual who defines their own good.⁸² Positive freedom, in contrast, is not about the ability to have a choice but to choose the good. Comer says, “Freedom isn’t about autonomy from authority but about liberating loving relationships from sin.” The power of this kind of freedom is beyond the self.⁸³ This makes bondage to the self, or the flesh, the more pressing legalistic position encountering the church today.

The solution is not to abandon authority because “all authority is oppressive.” Paradoxically, that puts the individual in the place of the oppressor. Instead, the Christian believes “authority is not inherently oppressive but a training ground for us to learn how to master our flesh and grow into people of love.”⁸⁴ Sternke and Tebbe recognize a similar plight but demonstrate how Christians are often confused about love when they question if love is critical for the contemporary faithful life.⁸⁵ Love, when rooted in God, is not against truth. They call this type of love “anemic.”⁸⁶ The transformation from anemic to powerful love occurs, in part, by “embodied participation.”⁸⁷ Embodied participation describes active faithfulness not for attaining God’s love but because the believer already has it. Embodied love is not “an external

⁸¹ John Mark Comer, *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies That Sabotage Your Peace* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2021), 136.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 136 – 137.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸⁵ Ben Sternke and Matt Tebbe, *Having the Mind of Christ: Eight Axioms to Cultivate a Robust Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 20 – 21.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 135 – 152.

performance for God” or “piling up ‘shoulds’ in the hope of attaining eternal life in the future.” Instead, it actualizes trust in God, who already participates in and for the believer’s life.⁸⁸

Sternke and Tebbe touch on the surface of a path that modern scholarship has just begun to scratch. Current legalistic efforts take on the same principles that biblical legalism did. What scholarship recognizes is that contemporary legalism is displayed by replacing what was once considered legalism with its own set of “shoulds” when the Bible calls the believer to a life of faithful devotion to Jesus and His cross and resurrection.

Theological Foundations

Scripture has much to say concerning the lifestyle of the disciple. Specifically, the Word of God speaks of the disciple living by faith through grace and not based on law or in any legalistic fashion. When Jesus was asked what *erga* His listeners should be concerned with, He baffled the crowd with His answer: “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe (*pisteuō*) in him whom he has sent’ (John 6:28 – 29, ESV). Faithfulness is the catalyst for spiritual formation in the life of the followers of Jesus. It is not predicated upon human effort.

Paul concerned himself with this issue with various churches. To the Galatians, he said:

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now, it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith; rather, "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal 3:10 – 14, ESV).

⁸⁸ Sternke and Tebbe, *Having the Mind of Christ*, 141.

Again, he reminds them, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (Gal 2:21, ESV). To the Romans, Paul says, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace (Rom 11:6, ESV).

It is the issue of works-based formation that concerns this DMIN project. Specifically, the contemporary legalistic nature of the adults of SRCC needs to be addressed. To this end, Christians must understand how freedom from under the law works due to God's grace. The basis for that knowledge is found in the New Testament. The theological foundation for a grace-based spiritual formational ministry is discovered in the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

Exchanging Truth for Lies

The fundamental problem of living in contemporary legalism is that Christians have exchanged the truth of God for lies. To that end, contemporary legalism is lie-based living. Paul's letter to the Romans provides a detailed description of the spiritual life based on lies. In Romans 1:24 – 25, Paul states, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen" (ESV). To understand Paul's theological flow, it is critical to grasp his rhetorical strategy.⁸⁹

Gripping Paul's rhetorical strategy in Romans includes understanding his context. Paul's intended audience is Gentile Christians, and it is their beliefs that he is concerned with changing.⁹⁰ So the question is, how will Paul convey the message to a church that he did not

⁸⁹ Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

plant that their beliefs need to shift? “Paul chooses to use foundational arguments that have a leveling effect, putting Gentile and Jewish Christians on the same footing.”⁹¹

To further understand Paul’s rhetorical technique, it is essential to understand Paul’s use of language as a means for interpretation of his theological point. Stowers helpfully points out blind spots of modern scholarship to this end. He describes how language finds its meaning “in the social practices, shared meaningful activities, of particular communities,” to which “the shared meaningful activities of communities constrain the meanings of texts in both a wider and more specific way.”⁹² Therefore, the modern interpreter must do the work of narrowing down the context of the text to derive meaning in the community to and from which it was written.

To this end, Paul’s rhetorical technique is best understood as “speech-in-character,” in which the speaker produces speech that represents not himself but an imaginary or real person.⁹³ Paul’s *prosopopeia*, impersonation, is a particular type of person. The shift from third person plural in Romans 1:18 – 32 to second person singular starting in chapter 2 indicates that Paul’s interlocutor is probably a Gentile Christian who has taken on the yoke of *nomos* who chooses to “call yourself a Jew” (Rom 2:17, ESV).⁹⁴

If this assessment is accurate, then Paul and his audience are in agreement with the wrongness of the violations mentioned in Romans 1:18 – 32, of which Paul’s interlocutor would have departed to join up with *nomos*. Therefore, the Gentile Proselyte Christian would agree with Paul’s “Amen!” of v. 25. They would have agreed that the pagan culture around and within their

⁹¹ Witherington III and Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 58.

⁹² Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, & Gentiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1994), 6 – 7.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 16 – 17.

⁹⁴ Rafael Rodriguez, *So You Call Yourself a Jew: Reappraising Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 49.

community did indeed “exchange the truth about God for a lie” even though “they are without excuse” (Rom 1:20c, ESV). At this point in the reading, the interlocutor would have felt secure in their faith as it is in alignment with Paul’s assessment of the Gentile plight.⁹⁵

Paul’s description of the pagan Gentile culture dictates that they were knowledgeable about God but “exchanged the truth about God for a lie.” He uses the same verb, *allassō*, in verse 23 to describe how they traded the eternal for the temporary; only when Paul repeats the word in verse 25 to refer to the exchange of truth for a lie, he adds the preposition *meta* to intensify its meaning.⁹⁶ It was a standard Jewish view of non-Jewish religion to interpret Gentile religious practices as abandoning God’s revealed truth altogether.⁹⁷ Since Paul’s reader identifies with the Jewish religion (Rom 2:17), he would view Paul’s description of the non-Jewish religious participants as those who “deserve to die” (Rom 1:32, ESV).

Then, Paul takes a dramatic turn in Romans 2:1 when he switches from the third person plural to addressing his interlocutor in the second person singular. In this severe turn, Paul now identifies his reader with the pagan sinful Gentile who has “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” and who “is without an excuse” (Rom 1:20; 2:1, ESV). If the reader is in agreement with Paul concerning the Gentile plight, then how can they be identified with the pagans who base their lives on lies?

According to Paul, the Gentile reader, who calls himself a Jew, is also guilty of the same thing as the Gentile religious culture he so readily condemns as he says, “because you (second person singular) practice the very same things.” Here, Matera is helpful:

⁹⁵ Rodriguez, *So You Call Yourself a Jew*, 50.

⁹⁶ Frank S. Thielman, *Romans*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 107.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

In this first address to his interlocutor (2:1 – 2)...Paul draws a close relation between those whom he has indicted in 1:18 – 32 and the arrogant interlocutor who judges them. That interlocutor may think that he is morally superior, but in the light of the gospel that Paul preaches, Paul knows that such a person is the same as those whom he judges.⁹⁸

Witherington and Hyatt agree when they conclude that Paul is not necessarily saying, “accusing the ‘you’ addressed here of committing all the same sort of moral sins listed in Romans 1:18 – 32, or of idolatry. Paul is accusing such a person of judgmentalism and some hypocrisy, and thus of carrying forward a pagan life into Christian existence to some degree.”⁹⁹

Since Paul’s reader has made a movement out of the Gentile background via *nomos* to avoid God’s wrath (Rom 1:18; 2:5) and His judgment (Rom 2:2), then Paul’s accusation that the reader is still in the crosshairs of God’s wrath would have been shocking. The exchanging of God's truth for lies results in God's punishment, for which He "gave them up to a debased mind." Thorsteinsson observes: "Paul is not only saying here to his gentile readership "you once were..." but also "beware, you are still..."¹⁰⁰ Paul’s point to resolve the problem of their hard and impenitent hearts (Rom 2:5) is not to turn to *nomos* but to an alternative and the proper solution.

The argument that Paul makes concerning the use of *nomos* is:

“But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the *nomos* and boast in God...What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin...But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from *nomos*, although the *nomos* and Prophets bear witness to it...What then shall we say? That *nomos* is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for *nomos* I would not have known sin...Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure” (Rom 2:17; 3:9, 21; 7:7, 13, ESV).

⁹⁸ Frank J. Matera, *Romans*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, ed. Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 61.

⁹⁹ Witherington III and Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 79.

¹⁰⁰ Runar M. Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 173.

The solution to the problem of death that sin produces, as revealed by *nomos*, is the very gospel for which the apostle has no shame and holds the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). That power reveals the righteousness of God “*ek pisteōs eis pistin*” resulting in righteousness for the one who lives by *pisteōs* (Rom 1:16 – 17, ESV). Paul identifies “my gospel” as the very instrument to reveal the secrets of the law-breaking heart revealed by Jesus Christ (Rom 2:16).

Therefore, the solution to the Roman legalistic faith based on lies is faithful adherence to the gospel of Christ Jesus. On the day that the gospel is fully revealed in the final judgment, it is not “the work of *nomos*” that will result in the salvation which gives life (Rom 2:15), but the power of the gospel that produces righteousness that justifies by grace through Jesus Christ (Rom 3:24). “From faith to faith,” then, should be seen as the faithfulness of Christ displayed as God’s grace (Rom 3:24 – 25, ESV) producing fidelity in the life which God’s grace is manifest.¹⁰¹ This is a work that *nomos* cannot produce.

The Greatest Law

Many live by the same code that led the man of Matthew 19:16 to ponder toward Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (ESV). Jesus’ response indicates that the man was asking an ethical question (Matt 19:17).¹⁰² The exchange back and forth is from the desire of the man to ensure he performs the right commandments so as not to forfeit his opportunity at eternal life. In the list of the laws that Jesus instructs the man to keep, he adds that

¹⁰¹ Matera, *Romans*, 93 – 94.

¹⁰² Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 717.

he should “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 19:19, ESV). Here, Jesus is invoking Leviticus 19:18 as a way for Jesus to teach the man to focus on God rather than himself.¹⁰³

It is understandable where the man is coming from to a certain extent. A virtuous life is a life that is detailed by good deeds. However, Aquinas notes: “A good life consists in good deeds. Now to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does but also how he does it.”¹⁰⁴ As Jesus attempts to move the focus from the man’s deeds, He centers His teaching on the heart of God’s ethic: love. The Bible connects the identity of God to love and teaches that love is the conduit of godly obedience (1 John 4:16). Love of the neighbor, then, is evidence of loyalty to God and is the primary mark of the Christian.¹⁰⁵

Jesus is tested on this law again in Matthew 22:35 – 40 (ESV):

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

Stassen and Gushee call this passage the norm of the Christian life.¹⁰⁶ Matthew’s account describes the questioner as a “lawyer,” which is only used in Matthew (cf. Mark 12:38 – 40; Luke 20:45, 46). The man is an expert in *nomos*, specifically asking Jesus, not for informational

¹⁰³ Osborne, *Matthew*, 718.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia I-II.57.5*, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis, vol. 2, *Man and the Conduct of Life* (New York, NY: Random House, 1945), 436.

¹⁰⁵ David T. Lamb, *The Emotions of God: Making Sense of a God Who Hates, Weeps, and Loves* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 36.

¹⁰⁶ David P. Gushee, and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 118.

purposes but to “test him.” As a representative of the Pharisees, the *nomos* expert hopes to expose any inadequacy of Jesus.¹⁰⁷

The nature of the test in the question needs to be made apparent to the contemporary reader. However, Matthew's readers were familiar with philosophical debates concerning the Torah's heavier and lighter commandments. Viewing the *nomos* expert's question in this light, the question of the “greatest” commandment is more about the importance rather than the priority of the commandments.¹⁰⁸ In this context, the *nomos* expert endeavors into religious “ethos in relation to which all the commandments can best be understood and implemented.”¹⁰⁹

Jesus' response evokes the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:6 – 9: “The Shema outlines a Torah lifestyle for spiritual formation: memorize, recite, instruct, and write out the Torah, and wear *tzitzit* (fringes) to remind themselves of Torah.”¹¹⁰ The object of the love that Jesus commands is “the Lord” (Matt 22:37, ESV). It is tempting to separate the nouns “heart,” “soul,” and “mind” as distinct objects, but that would be missing the point of Jesus' response. Jesus' message is to love God with the entire being, and all parts of life are to be focused on that love.¹¹¹ Furthermore, it is a reciprocal love that does not find its genesis in the one whom Jesus commands to love; instead, it finds its origins in God Himself.¹¹² It is as if Jesus is saying, “Give God what is His and what is of Him.”

¹⁰⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 910.

¹⁰⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21 – 28*, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 81 – 82.

¹⁰⁹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 910.

¹¹⁰ Scot McKnight, *Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), 7.

¹¹¹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 823.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Jesus not only claims this to be the most important command, but it is also the first command (Matt 22:38). When He says that the second is like it, does He mean that in order or that it is like it in importance? Most interpret Jesus' phrasing in the latter teaching that the second commandment is second in importance.¹¹³ However, love for the neighbor flows from a love for God. Since love is part of the identity of God, then love for neighbor is encompassed by the love for God. Loving the neighbor is a possibility due to loving God. Therefore, loving God is in a "higher sphere" that umbrellas loving the neighbor.¹¹⁴ As loving God is both the first (*prōtos*) and the great (*megas*) commandment, so is love for the neighbor the second in order and importance.

But what does "love your neighbor as yourself" mean? The "neighbor" is to be understood as any human being with a need that the Christian can meet, as demonstrated in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25 – 37).¹¹⁵ Luz adds:

According to many Western interpreters, *sicut teipsum* (as yourself) means that one should love the neighbor as oneself, not "equally" but only "similarly." Thus, one remains oneself the neighbor. Her "love" for the neighbor is understood not as a feeling but as an action, and it relates both to external support and to spiritual things. Since the love of neighbor is focused on God, it involves the duty to lead one's neighbor to God.¹¹⁶

In this sense, love of the neighbor is participation in the love of God. There is no loving God without active and tangible displays of love for those in need. Jesus completes His teaching by instructing His dubious audience that all the Law and Prophets depend on those commands (Matt 22:40). Talbert calls this instruction the "hermeneutical key" of Matthew.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 911 – 912.

¹¹⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, 823.

¹¹⁵ Luz, *Matthew*, 78.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, eds. Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 255.

Not only is Matthew's construction of the great commandments a hermeneutical key, but it also provides a theological, spiritual formation framework for the disciple. In the previous section, Paul addresses Christians attempting to escape judgment by adhering to *nomos*. The efforts are futile because they "exchange the truth about God for a lie." In this section, Jesus' teaching is that all of the Law and Prophets hang on the laws of loving God and one's neighbor as oneself. This makes the benefactors of the fulfilled commandments God, oneself, and others. Faithfulness is exercised in these three. Therefore, these are the three where truth is being exchanged for lies. The problem of legalism exists in matters of faith concerning God, oneself, and others.

Obedience to the great commandments is to adhere to the gospel. That is, it occurs in fidelity to Jesus. To this end, Jipp adds:

Christ functions as a "living law" in that, as exemplified in his self-giving death and in his implementation of the Torah in his teachings, love for neighbor is personified within his very nature...Through walking in love, welcoming one another, and bearing one another's burdens, the church imitates the pattern of their King with the result that their communities are internally harmonious.¹¹⁸

Contribution to the kingdom of God means clinging to the truth about God in that faithfulness to God is demonstrated by a love for Him that is seen in love for others as one views himself as inundated by the love of Christ, who is the living law. The follower's life is rooted in the love of God and expressed as love for one's neighbor. Life in Jesus' kingdom is a reflection of God's love.

¹¹⁸ Jipp, *Christ is King*, 75.

Training in Godliness

Paul instructs Timothy in personal godliness, which is also wise for any believer to heed: “Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way” (1 Tim 4:7 – 8, ESV). For Paul, godliness is a treasure for which the Christian will be sold out. Donald Whitney believes that this instruction informs the Christ-follower on how one becomes more like Christ.¹¹⁹ Paul establishes godliness as the purpose for practicing Spiritual Disciplines.

Timothy is taught that godliness is the result of a spiritual training regimen. Paul uses the Hellenistic word *gymnazo*, which means “to exercise naked.” It is used figuratively in the NT, emphasizing a focus on what is inward instead of external.¹²⁰ The nude athlete motif finds its origins in a tradition of the Athenians. According to this tale, a runner leading a race lost his footing due to his leg coverings sliding down his legs. The Athenian archon, Hippomenes, enforced a law requiring athletes to exercise in the nude to prevent a similar incident so they could compete at their highest potential.¹²¹

The context of Paul’s instruction is for Timothy not to get caught up with “silly myths” (1 Tim 4:7a). Instead, his focus is to “train yourself for godliness.” Christians are to shed that which is hindering their godliness training. Essentially, this is what spiritual discipline is: “Paul urged Timothy to concentrate his energy on vigorous training for genuine godliness. For Paul, genuine godliness involved both right belief and obedient action. Godly habits would not appear without determined human purpose and effort. Timothy was to persist in that Christian discipline which

¹¹⁹ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* Rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 5.

¹²⁰ *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1. “γυμνάζω.”

¹²¹ John Mouratidis, “The Origin of Nudity in Greek Athletics,” *The Journal of Sport History* 12, no. 3 (Winter, 1985), 214-215.

would prepare him for God's highest purposes."¹²² Since the purpose of practicing spiritual disciplines is closeness to and conformity to Christ, those habits are developed by effort for godliness.¹²³ Training for godliness focuses on the Spirit that dwells within (1 Cor 3:16) and prepares the Christian for God's highest by casting off that which hinders; therefore, it is pertinent that the Christian adheres to 1 Timothy 4:7 – 8 by connecting these practices with movements toward Christlikeness.

Rooted in God's Love and Work

In his letter to the believers in Ephesus, this is Paul's second intercessory prayer:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 4:14 – 19, ESV).

This prayer is so God will impart His power to the believers and move in their hearts with a deep awareness of His divine love for them. Within Paul's words, there is a plea to the Father (v. 14), a recognition of the reality of the Son (v. 17), and a plea for the movement of the Spirit (v. 16). For spiritual formation is toward a Christ-centered life, so the focus is on “being rooted and grounded in love” (v. 17).

For the believer to find themselves “being rooted and grounded in love” is to live in the reality of Christ dwelling in their hearts through faith (Eph 4:17a, ESV). It is a cruciform reality. It is, functionally, at the center of Paul's theology: “Cruciformity is about conformity to the

¹²² Thomas Lea, “1 Timothy” in *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, vol 34, The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 134.

¹²³ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 19.

crucified Christ, expressed as faith, love, power, and hope.”¹²⁴ Finding themselves conformed to the crucified and resurrected Christ, the Spirit’s strength and power work in the “inner self,” which is functionally the equivalent of the heart.¹²⁵

In this context, being rooted and established in love is beyond a salvation experience. Paul uses the perfect tense to express a more profound sense of God’s love, resulting in an abiding awareness of His presence and knowledge. Because of the Trinity’s presence and the believer’s growing responsiveness, the believer is responsible for living a lifestyle described in the second half of the letter. The desire on Paul’s part is for “his readers to have a deeper spiritual experience” than they already had.¹²⁶ The message stems from knowledge and experience of:

God’s love for us (“because of his great love” for us, 2:4) in making us alive with Christ, uniting us with him in such a way that we have participated in his resurrection and enthronement (2:5–6), incorporating us into Christ’s body (2:15–16), experiencing forgiveness of sin based on Christ’s loving sacrifice (5:2), choosing us in love before the foundation of the world (1:4–5), and a host of other blessings that represent the outflow of God’s extraordinary love for us.¹²⁷

This happens with godly training rooted in God’s love, specifically, the method of interaction with God’s Word, prayer, confession, and service, both personally and corporately. The goal is to produce a plan to enable the believer to be “rooted and grounded in (God’s growing) love.”

¹²⁴ Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 369.

¹²⁵ Arnold, *Ephesians*, 210.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

Theoretical Foundations

The faithful lifestyle of a Christian does not happen accidentally: “We need to understand that Jesus is a *thinker*...he is the greatest thinker of the human race: the most intelligent person who ever lived on earth.”¹²⁸ A disciple is learning and growing in Christ: “There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture.”¹²⁹ Godly men and women do not just listen to what God’s Word says but put it into practice: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas 1:22, ESV).

Because the disciple is a doer of the Word, they must find the root of becoming Christlike in the Scriptures: “Evangelicalism has been strong when it has likewise sought to cultivate a spirituality that is first and foremost centered in the Scriptures.”¹³⁰ The Bible is what causes the disciple to move toward godly spirituality. It is their authority and guide.

To implement a ministry that will educate and equip the disciples at SRCC, it must function from the Word of God and be executed from the top down. This will require an overhaul of the current ministry framework embedded within SRCC. It will not maximize its potential if it is seen as another option to add to the busyness of the already established culture. Dr. Charles Anderson details how “overchoice” does not enhance the concept of freedom but rather illuminates the vice of busyness.¹³¹ The seemingly limitless options available are an

¹²⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco, CA: Harper One, 2006), 189.

¹²⁹ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 22.

¹³⁰ Michael Haykin, *The God Who Draws Near: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality* (Faverdale North, Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2007), 48.

¹³¹ Charles A. Anderson, “The Business of Busyness: What Should We Make of Martha?,” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michale J. Sleasman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 157 – 158.

indictment of organizations pursuing growth: “There are so few limits on our existence and experience that we face difficulties in identity formation.”¹³²

Anderson’s observations are valid for efforts in spiritual formation, as well. South Rock is not immune to the issues of identity formation and the busyness that stifles spiritual growth in those areas. In an effort to do everything that they *can*, the message is that they *should* do as much as they can. Without being aware, a contemporary legalistic message is put forth, and spiritual growth and discipleship become focused on effort rather than on the grace of God.¹³³

Dr. Anderson is one of many who comment on the problem of an extensive menu of options. Pastor J.D. Greear asserts that more choices lead to greater compartmentalization. Discipleship efforts become separate from the mission of the church. When this happens, disciples are kept from participating in the Great Commission, and some are kept from the Christian faith altogether.¹³⁴ This is a result of the culture of the church. Therefore, it is a cultural problem that needs to be addressed. “Strategy without culture,” Greear declares, “yields fatigue, frustration, and failure.”¹³⁵ A movement toward grace-based spiritual formational ministry is not achieved by adding work and effort to what is already experienced. It will involve a culture change.

Andy Stanley says, “You should never begin a conversation about change by addressing where you are now. You should always begin with where you want to be.”¹³⁶ To implement this ministry, cultural changes must begin at the leadership level to help people identify lies they

¹³² Anderson, “The Business of Busyness,” 158.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ J. D. Greear, *Gaining by Losing: Why the Future Belongs to Churches that Send* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 111.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 156.

¹³⁶ Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 315.

believe in and exchange them for the "truth about God" (Rom 1:25, ESV). This type of cultural change will mean letting go of specific programs that may or may not be deemed as "good" or "traditional." However, achieving the desired goal of grace-based living means clarifying the church's cultural identity. Some questions that will be considered moving forward:

1. Who does South Rock believe they are? In other words, how does SRCC describe its identity?
2. What ministries and programs are still going past their prime? Implementing a ministry that educates and equips the members of SRCC to participate with Christ requires a singular focus. It is a lifestyle, not an option to choose from.
3. What are the expectations for the members of SRCC? Are these expectations clearly articulated? Are they assumed?
4. How is the truth about God taught at SRCC?
5. How is the truth, according to Scripture, about oneself taught at SRCC?
6. How is the truth concerning others taught at SRCC?
7. What is the framework for experiencing community at SRCC? What is the avenue for connection within the church?

Discipleship is not taught in the Bible as something optional for the believer. Nor is it explained as something "in addition" to participation within the mission of God and His instruction for the church. An effective ministry concerned with the spiritual formation of the church's members will meet its people where they are. Often, these individuals struggle with real-life situations, traumas, and wounds, either self-inflicted or as the result of someone else.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Jared C. Wilson, *The Imperfect Disciple: Grace for People Who Can't Get Their Act Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 22 – 23.

Wilson describes discipleship as “following Jesus not on some religious quest to become bigger, better, or faster but to become more trusting of his mercy in our total inability to become those things.”¹³⁸ His description of becoming more trusting of God’s mercy is what a lifestyle based on God’s grace is about.

Author Mark Maulding addresses the church’s responsibility in the “do more” culture. He describes it as “secrets” that “all have their foundation in an incorrect view of God and inaccurate expectations of him and ourselves.”¹³⁹ He asserts that mental and emotional healing works in tandem with spiritual growth. Mental and emotional struggles, though, are viewed as indicators where lies of the “flesh of Christians” are in control.¹⁴⁰ Understanding “flesh patterns” aids in turning pain over to the power of the Lord. He relies on Isaiah 61:1 – 2 to express the freedom that comes from first identifying these lies and then releasing them so that the truth of God can prevail.¹⁴¹

Maulding describes the needs in life as security, competency, acceptance, love, and esteem.¹⁴² All are searching to fulfill these needs, and many are trying to accomplish this through the efforts of the flesh: “I must work hard to be the best, so I can prove I’m adequate – a central lie that sets the course of life from the flesh.”¹⁴³ Galatians 6:8 says, “The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life” (ESV). Human effort to meet these needs results in mental, emotional,

¹³⁸ Wilson, *The Imperfect Disciple*, 31.

¹³⁹ Mark Maulding, *God’s Best Kept Secret: Christianity is Easier Than You Think* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 14.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 167 – 168.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 169.

and spiritual corruption: “When we don’t know how to find the source of these needs in Christ, we set ourselves up to be harmed by our own destructive patterns.”¹⁴⁴

Therefore, the objective is to design a spiritual formation ministry that educates and equips disciples to participate in the kingdom of God in such a way as to see Jesus as the source that meets security, competency, acceptance, love, and esteem needs. Maulding presents a framework for identifying and understanding flesh patterns and exposing them to God to meet life’s mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. The flesh operates in “three central lies:” about God, yourself, and others.¹⁴⁵ As those lies are exposed, he counsels his reader to ask, “What is God’s truth He wants that will replace each lie?”¹⁴⁶

While Maulding presents a discipleship model for counseling individuals, the theories can also work corporately. The ministry objective is to replace the lies of the flesh with the truth of God (Rom 1:25). These lies are centralized in belief concerning God, the self, and others (Matt 22:35 – 40). When God’s truth effectively replaces lies, then life eternal is experienced (Gal 6:8). This is training in godliness (1 Tim 4:7 – 8) that is rooted in the love of God (Eph 4:14 – 19). In other words, spiritual formation results in living from God’s grace, enabling the disciple to “not grow weary of doing good” (Gal 6:9, ESV). Not only will the disciple be saved from something (flesh), but they will be saved to something (union in Christ) for which they draw meaning and purpose.

¹⁴⁴ Maulding, *God’s Best Kept Secret*, 171.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 181 – 182.

Conclusion

The gospel of the Bible is a call for the Christian to live a life based on God's grace and in fidelity to the risen Christ Jesus. This life is more than a new set of works to replace the previous broken way. It is the lifestyle of the disciple that is rooted in the love of God. To participate in this lifestyle is to live in the kingdom of God. Discipleship methods are abundant in the contemporary church. Adding to the menu of options for church members to participate is not ideal as it sends the message of another thing they are asked to do. Instead, a better option is to overhaul the discipleship process by recognizing lies at the foundation of a life lived in legalism. Once those lies are detected, godliness training in Scripture, prayer, confession, and service will aid in replacing those lies with God's truth. As a result, the disciple's mind will be renewed, and their heart will be restored according to God's volition. It is what the ministry of this project intends to accomplish moving forward.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Members of SRCC do not have a clear pathway for discipleship. Disciple-making is taught as part of the Great Commission teaching of Jesus (Matt 28:18 – 20; Mark 16:15 – 18; Acts 1:8), but this is primarily in the preaching. Small groups and Bible study classes are posted on a connections wall and online on the church's website. However, there is no stated expectation concerning participation, nor is there a clear pathway for connection to these ministries outside of member initiation or invitation. Attendance, offerings, and baptisms are counted and regularly reported to the church board and leadership. There is no agreed-upon stratus for measuring the effectiveness of the discipleship ministries of the church. The expectation of members is focused on three primary sections as dictated in the Membership Covenant in the following table:

Table 3.1: SRCC Membership Covenant

SRCC EXPECTATION	ACTION POINT	BIBLICAL BASIS
PROTECT THE UNITY OF SRCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting in Love Toward Other Members • Refusing to Participate in Gossip • Following Church Leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ephesians 4:29 • Proverbs 6:16 – 19 • Hebrews 13:17
SHARE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SRCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praying for the Church and its Growth • Attending Services Faithfully • Giving Regularly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Luke 14:23 • Hebrews 10:35 • 1 Corinthians 16:2
SERVE THE MINISTRY OF SRCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discovering and Using Gifts and Talents • Living a Godly Life • Being Equipped to Serve Others • Developing a Servant's Heart 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Peter 4:10 • Ephesians 4:11 – 12 • Philippians 2:3 – 4

Furthermore, the SRCC member is asked to sign the SRCC Statement of Faith aligning with specific tenets of doctrine. While the SRCC Membership Covenant does provide action

points regarding a godly life, service, attendance, and giving, the primary focus is on outreach/invitation and service. Attendance and offerings are the primary data points that are measured, and much of SRCC's success in ministry is based on those variables. No discipleship measurement exists.

Since the purpose of this research is to help implement a discipleship ministry based on God's grace that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian life, a clear discipleship pathway must be demonstrated. The following is the proposed pathway of the intervention.

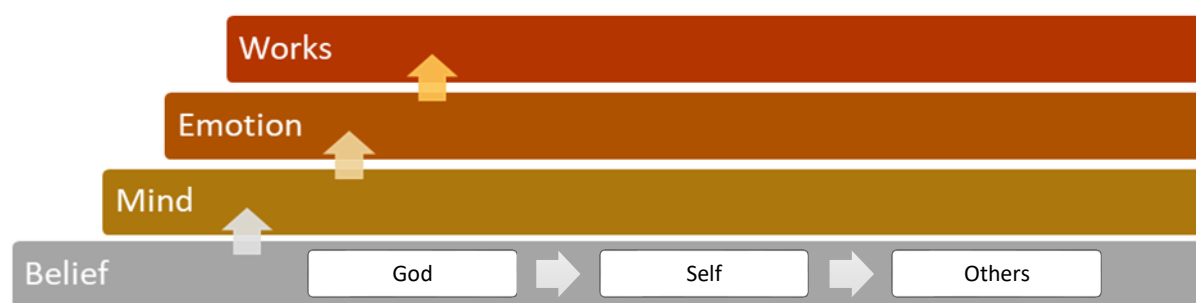


Figure 3.1: Grace-based Discipleship Lifestyle

The figure above demonstrates a life rooted in faith. The basis is belief about God, the self, and others. Actions are usually based on feelings, which are based on thoughts. The mind is centered on beliefs about God, the self, and others. To attempt to control behavior, emotion, or thoughts without addressing faith in God, self, and others does not hold out over time. When the underlying beliefs are addressed, then thoughts, emotions, and behavior are changed and appropriately rooted in truth. Participation in the proposed discipleship pathway addresses faith issues concerning the truthful belief about God, self, and others. Information concerning God and the Bible (mind), motivation and heartfelt inspiration (emotion), and Christian service, acts, and works (works) all flow from the belief foundation.

A grace-based intervention heavily emphasizes a re-evaluation of belief-level discipleship. When Jesus says, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28, ESV), He is demonstrating a rejoicing of the return of a wayward person. However, the original language emphasizes Jesus as not just giving rest but being rest. Another reading could look like this: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will rest you." Rest is not merely something given to those who are saved, but Jesus is the rest. The emphasis is on His presence as the rest. This counters the legalistic view that discipleship is a two-step (or more!) process. The gospel is not merely for making converts, but it disciplines the disciple. "The gospel actually makes and matures disciples; it is the catalyst for salvation and sanctification."¹

As seen in Figure 3.1, a grace-based discipleship approach (GBDA) is not interested in eliminating works but only revisiting the works of the disciple that are rooted in faith. To address the problem of a contemporary legalistic posture, GBDA seeks to realign the works of the disciple from faith rather than the other way around. Thus, this research project seeks to anchor the discipleship efforts of SRCC in faith rather than human effort, which leads to faith. It also seeks to create a clear discipleship pathway for the members of SRCC. Clark and Corran's work addresses the interrelationship between morality and legalism, suggesting that legalism need not be eliminated in order to live out an ethical public and private life. They suggest that a distinction between morality and legalism is a "modern Western one" and that a legalistic rule can be used to produce an ethical public and private life, even in Christianity.²

¹ Jonathan K. Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship: Revised and Expanded* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 24.

² Morgan Clarke and Emily Corran, "Introduction: Rules and Ethics," in *Rules and Ethics: Perspectives from Anthropology and History*, ed. Morgan Clarke and Emily Corran (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 2 – 3.

While legalism and morality are closely tied together, and there are positive ethical outcomes when rule is applied and enforced, this project's methodology does not seek to accomplish ethics but faithfulness to the present Lord in the life of the believer.³ Furthermore, a grace-based approach to discipleship closes the gap between an ethical life and belief by realizing the grace of God as the source of ethics rather than the results of it. GBDA rearranges the moral focus to an outcome of faithful living “rooted and grounded” in the love of Christ (Eph 4:17, ESV).

Intervention Design

The primary means of discipleship at SRCC is in a small group or classroom format that revolves mostly around a Bible study or curriculum experience. Christian fellowship is experienced, and relationships are developed, creating the possibility of spiritual growth, which leads to godliness. However, the possibility of a contemporary legalistic posture also exists. Furthermore, there is no stated expectation to participate in this format, confusing church members of its intent. The result is a mix of interest in biblical knowledge and social gatherings. Meanwhile, attendance in weekend services and offerings is growing. In and of themselves, these activities are not negative, but the mission of SRCC is to “Help People Find and Follow Jesus.” More importantly, Jesus commissions His followers to make disciples and to teach them what they know of following Him (Matt 28:19 – 20; Luke 24:47 – 48). Dobson makes the point that discipleship is primarily an identity. Everything else is a role (parent, pastor, spouse, employee,

³ Clarke and Corran’s work presumes that a concern for rules is not a hindrance to the ethical self. This differs from the GBDA approach here. While GBDA endorses the ethical Christian life, it does so by helping the disciple realize the presence of God in the saved life, not by centering one’s own self on rules or ethics. In this case, morality flows from the faithful life rather than the efforts of the individual producing faithfulness.

deacon).⁴ This is mostly true, although the act of making disciples can also happen while operating in these roles. This is why GBDA is a crucial intervention for SRCC. The works conducted within these roles ought not to create a heavier laden, but GBDA shows how the Lord is present with the disciple and demonstrates a purpose for the works created by the roles. Each of these roles of a disciple contains the capacity to carry out the Great Commission when the discipleship pathway is clearly defined.

Followers are considered conduits, or “vessels” of the work of God (Rom 9:21; 2 Tim 2:21). The instructions are for disciples to make disciples, but the execution of this command is based on God’s grace and not on human effort (Eph 2:8 – 10). The design of this project is to discover discipleship ministry that leads to freedom in God’s grace. The goal is not to add more tasks to church volunteers but to experience freedom in God's presence with each vessel. Moreover, the disciple finds purpose in the task rather than expecting to be fulfilled by the work. Actions are considered outcomes of God's present grace.

Process of GBDA Intervention

The purpose of the intervention is to implement a structure for experiencing God's grace that is the foundation of a ministry that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian disciple's lifestyle. The intervention will happen in four phases. The first phase will be to secure church leadership approval. In the second phase, the researcher will recruit the Participation Group and conduct the GBDA Participation Group survey (Appendix C). The third phase will include the administration of the Participation Group. Finally, the fourth phase will be for the evaluation of the qualitative and quantitative data.

⁴ Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, 24.

The first step will be to solicit church leadership approval (Appendix A) by conducting an in-person interview to determine the church's understanding of what discipleship is. The interview will ask similar questions to Appendix G with follow-up questions and comments depending upon their answers. Elders will need to complete a consent form after IRB approval and prior to the in-person interview (Appendix D). Since the researcher is not the lead pastor, the researcher will solicit an Advisory Board, which consists of the lead minister and an elder who oversees discipleship ministry. The purpose of this board will be to supervise and oversee the direction of the project as it relates to the discipleship efforts of the church. It will involve a series of informal discussions to assess the proceedings of the participation group and potential ministry projects.



Figure 3.2: Advisory Board

The Advisory Board will also be responsible for the evaluation of the research program. The evaluation of the project will determine the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation as well as any changes to SRCC's discipleship ministries moving forward. The Advisory Board will also aid in any presentation of results or recommendations to church leadership.

In the next step, the researcher will solicit permission from those who are taking part in groups and classes at SRCC to participate in a survey to determine the health of the discipleship ministry. An email will be sent out (Appendix B) to recruit their input. Approximately 150 emails will be sent. Those who grant permission will fill out answers to the survey presented in Appendix C. It is in this step that data is collected to measure the understanding of the role of the disciple and the result of the church's efforts to educate, equip, and enrich this role.

From this, a participation group of no more than fifteen will be formed. If more than fifteen indicate that they would be willing to be a part of the group, then the researcher will select the participants and assign three or four as alternates in case someone drops out. All participants in the action research group will consent (Appendix D) to attend a thirty to sixty-minute session to go over what, why, and how the process will be done. They will also be instructed on why they are participating in the research project and will be invited to an informal meeting that will detail what the evaluation is about and what they might encounter during the process. The participants will be given a release and consent form, and upon signing the form, they will be in the participation group. From there, they will participate in a formal meeting dictating each participant's expectations. The survey will give information about the background of each participant and their outlook on their life as a disciple. All meetings will have a presentation that outlines each topic for that specific session. Sessions will take place on Sunday evenings.

The timeline for implementing the intervention will be over the course of six weeks. The implementation will start with an initial meeting in week one. The initial meeting will provide an introduction to the project, which consists of a theological foundation, the purpose of the project, and the expectations of the participants. In week two, an overview of grace and discipleship will

be given, as well as providing a conceptual framework and definition of grace and GBDA.

Weeks three through six will address the topics of the marks of a disciple: interaction with the Bible, prayer, confession, and outreach, respectively. In weeks two through six, a presentation of the topic will be presented by the researcher, followed by a discussion by the Participation Group. An experiential element will also be provided relating to each topic.

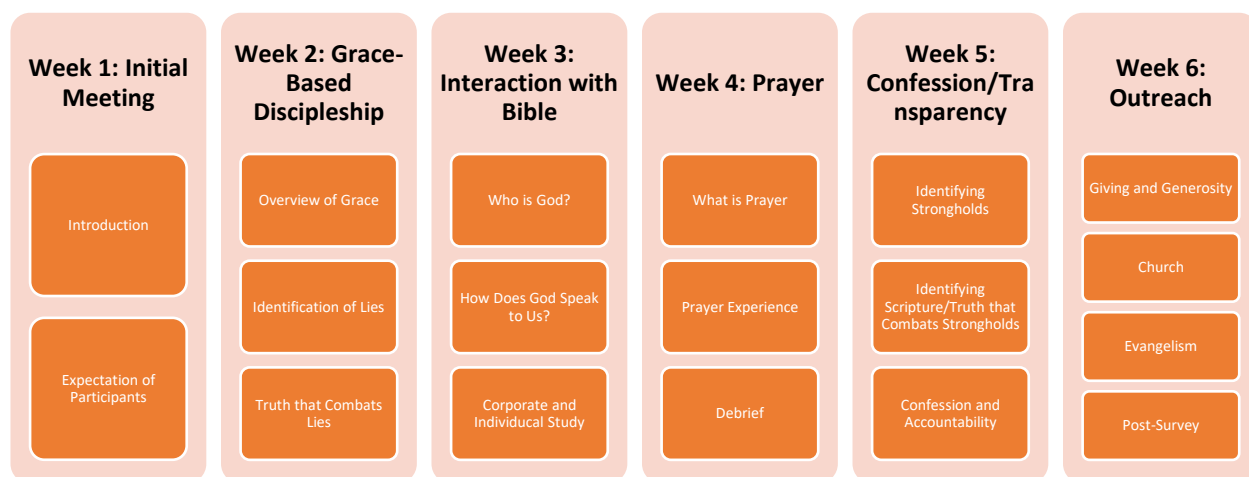


Figure 3.3: Participation Schedule

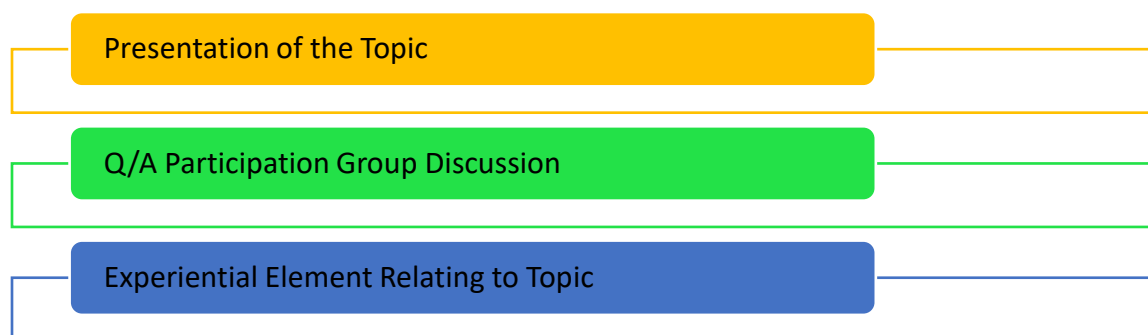


Figure 3.4: Participation Group Presentation Structure

The purpose of the participation group is to work through the grace-based discipleship material and measure the understanding of the lifestyle of the disciple. Rhythms and habits will be taught in a discussion format. Weekly work will be done to prepare for the discussion the

following week. The researcher will facilitate the discussion. From the participation group, three to five people will be solicited to participate as a focus group. The focus group will contribute in a pre-interview after week one, assessing their belief about God, the self, and others. It will be a written assessment in a short answer format (Appendix F).⁵ They will then take part in a post-interview after week six, answering the same questions. The researcher will evaluate the growth in their answers to determine the efficacy of the program.

Most Christians believe that regular engagement with God's Word, prayer, transparency, and outreach are common practices of a disciple of Jesus. However, the researcher aims to gauge how often that happens. Daily engagement in the Word and prayer is ideal. Weekly experience in confession within the group paradigm is also the aim. The project also aims to move the disciple toward regular involvement in outreach through service inside and outside the church, but also for the participant to look for opportunities to engage in evangelistic efforts.

The researcher will meet with the Advisory Board throughout the duration of the program in informal meetings, but there will be a final meeting following the program to discuss its value and further changes, decisions, and implementation. The Advisory Board will also oversee course correction for the project, as well as provide accountability for the researcher in terms of accomplishing the church's mission and doctrine. The flow of the project will be as follows:

⁵ Maulding, *God's Best Kept Secret*, 17 – 19. The questionnaire is based on Grace Life International's ADT on Demand web series. <https://www.gracelifeinternational.com/events/advanced-discipleship-training-on-demand>.



Figure 3.5: Project Flow Chart

Decisions to continue the program with any necessary changes will be made. The research is designed to experience and test the legitimacy of a singular discipleship pathway that teaches a lifestyle based on God's grace. The expectation is that participants will experience spiritual growth. Journaling throughout the experience will help monitor potential biases so that the groups can be observed objectively. This research project is designed to narrow the discipleship ministry of SRCC and not be skewed by previous experiences. Although the goal is not to dismantle current ministry structures, discussions and evaluation for the discipleship ministry of SRCC will be under the advisement of the Lead Minister and Advisory Board.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

Phase 1: Leadership Approval

Due to the position of the researcher, the intervention design is initiated with the approval of the Lead Minister (Appendix H). With his endorsement, the Advisory Board met in a

classroom at the church for two hours for the Informal Interview process. The purpose of the Informal Interview was to establish a basis for common grounds concerning the discipleship efforts of SRCC. The researcher was also able to provide information concerning the DMIN project and the stated purpose of the GBDA intervention. They also addressed the need for re-evaluating SRCC's discipleship ministries. Although the discussion did not stay strictly with the informal interview questions, the questions presented in Appendix G provided the structure of the Informal Interview.

The Informal Interview began with prayer and a meal. The researcher provided the purpose of the meeting by addressing the problem statement and thesis of the project. All agreed that the issue at hand is addressed at SRCC. The researcher provided definitions for grace and discipleship for the purpose of common knowledge of these terms. Emphasis on the grace of God being experienced by His presence was exhibited. The researcher also contended for a broader view of the discipleship ministries of SRCC to relate to evangelistic efforts rather than a separation of those ministries. The Great Commission was examined, and the Advisory Board agreed that making disciples was a call for all Christians. Disciple-making is best experienced relationally and not primarily in a program.⁶ The relational element in discipleship makes it difficult to measure the church's efforts. Nonetheless, the Advisory Board agreed that it is a problem to address. Once established, the researcher began the interview.

The Advisory Board expressed the importance of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22 – 26) in any conversation concerning the church's spiritual health. One phrase that was used to describe the spiritual direction of SRCC was "admonish the idle." Clarification of this statement

⁶ Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, 34. Dodson carries this idea even further, claiming that programs "tacitly convey the idea that discipleship is rational" rather than relational. Since God is a relational God, Dodson argues that making disciples is primarily a relational activity. The method communicates just as loudly as the content. Therefore, discipleship is more than an educational experience.

concluded that discipleship efforts are a part of the sanctification process. Admonishing the idle was the Advisory Board's way of acknowledging the necessity to call the members of SRCC to discipleship activity. The researcher re-emphasized the project's thesis that spiritual flourishing will be experienced at SRCC if that activity is rooted in God's grace. Burnout will be experienced if the focus is on ethical or behavioral outcomes rather than faithful adherence to God. Michael MacKenzie contends that church organizational ministry burnout is related to the same issues that cause vocational burnout. The pastor is weary because the role is no longer rooted in God's love but rather in "performance, control, production, knowledge, accumulation, accomplishment, adrenaline," among many other tasks and works.⁷ Likewise, the church can grow weary of trying to do these things. It results in a "mis-identity" that calls for realignment in Christ.⁸ A grace-based approach to SRCC's discipleship efforts does not negate the importance of the church's discipleship efforts. Rather, it is a realignment of its works in and from the grace of God.

One way to gauge the health and vibrancy of this ministry is whether disciples are making other disciples. Spiritual reproductivity is seen as a critical sign. Once again, the evangelistic values of SRCC were present. Discussion of the relationship between evangelism and discipleship occurred. One Advisory Board member discussed evangelism as the "mission of the church," while discipleship was talked about as primarily educational. The researcher inquired about the relationship between the two activities since the Great Commission commands the activity of making disciples, where evangelism is presumed to be a vehicle for

⁷ Michael MacKenzie, *Don't Blow Up Your Ministry: Defuse the Underlying Issues that Take Pastors Down* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 141.

⁸ Ibid.

accomplishing this task. The Advisory Board suggested that more conversation should resume at a later time about this topic.

The discussion centered on Christian maturity as evidence of the effectiveness of any discipleship method. One problem that needs further discussion is that there was ambivalence concerning what this means. The Advisory Board discussed the merits of a Paul-Timothy understanding of discipleship where each follower of Jesus is to have a person in their life who provides godly wisdom with efforts of enhancing their spiritual formation, all the while operating in that same position in someone else's life. Gary Tyra contends that this is a part of the contextualization of missional spiritualization. He calls this practice "instrumental" as it is how a disciple cultivates his or her relationship with God.⁹

More questions were asked about the Paul-Timothy model of discipleship at SRCC. The researcher was concerned whether this was a stated expectation or not. If this is the expected model, is it the model that the church specifically, intentionally, and purposefully promotes? Do the members of the church understand this structure? How has SRCC heard about this model or any discipleship model at SRCC? It was agreed that more specifics concerning discipleship expectations should be addressed in SRCC's future.

In considering the discipleship pathway of SRCC, it was noted that the church does not have a clearly communicated pathway. They noted that discipleship is an expectation but not one that is conveyed as it ought to be. Questions of whether discipleship ministries are a priority

⁹ Gary Tyra, "Welcome to Paul's World: The Contextual Nature of a Missional Spirituality," in *Spirituality for the Sent: Casting a New Vision for the Missional Church*, ed. Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 124 – 25. Tyra promotes a dual nature of mission spirituality that is understood as "indicative" in one's effects in a relationship directly with God and as "instrumental" by which the follower of Jesus cultivates that relationship. It is the "instrumental" prong that is applicable here. According to Tyra, the "instrumental" explication is the intentional engagement of practicing one's relationship with God that results in living out His mission.

were discussed, and they affirmed the importance of this project. The Advisory Board identified relationships and invitations as the means by which most SRCC members are introduced to any discipling program already set up by the church. Concerning conversations on how to move attenders of church services toward active church participation ensued. The current ministry design was called "al-a-carte" to describe how the church provides an extensive menu of programming but little communicated effort to engage in a measurable way.

The researcher brought up concerns with the "al-a-carte" understanding of SRCC's programming, citing a specific response of a prior conversation with an SRCC attender and a staff member. The staff member encouraged the attendee to look at the church's website and pick something to participate in. The Advisory Board agreed that this type of response lacks intentionality in the church's discipleship efforts and that it was most likely due to unclear expectations and the menu-type of programming. The Advisory Board concluded that SRCC's problem was not in programming but in the complexity of the programming. They hoped to revisit this discussion in the future to simplify SRCC's ministry approach.

One concern that was brought up by the Advisory Board was a clear definition of grace-based discipleship. Members of the board expressed unease over recent conversations of poor theological understanding of grace. The Advisory Board moved to ensure that a proper definition of grace does not mean an excuse for sin, nor does it mean an affirmation of a sinful lifestyle. The researcher emphasized a theological understanding in Romans 6, noting that grace does not grant approval of sin, but salvation from its nature. Furthermore, the researcher discussed the second session of the Participation Group experience as the proper place to identify these issues. It was agreed that grace without works is misleading. The Advisory Board emphasized that any approach to a pathway of discipleship must be evidenced by spiritual transformation as opposed

to spiritual laziness. Willard points out that "grace is opposed to earning, not to effort."¹⁰ In other words, grace that does not lead to a participatory lifestyle of the disciple in the gospel of Jesus is not true grace. The consensus is that the project needs to be based on the grace of God and not mankind's, as "grace and truth came through Jesus" (John 1:17, ESV).

A grace-based approach is favorable because it not only addresses the issue of works and effort, but it also allows ministry for those who have been hurt, confused, or doubted. Baker points out that "society has a skewed perspective about what is honorable and shameful." He goes on to say, "Even when the labeling of something as shameful is in line with God's perspective, the way people treat the person who is doing the shameful thing is often not in line with God's ways."¹¹ GBDA will enable SRCC to disciple its people in such a way that the gospel will have the ability for transformation rather than elements of guilt or shame. Baker also emphasizes the disciple's life as both private and in community, and any discipleship efforts centering on the presence of God should follow suit.¹² GBDA seeks a similar position.

The Advisory Board approved of the project and believed many benefits would come of it, including providing gospel-centric ministry to a congregation eager to increase their walk with Jesus and a clear expectation of the lifestyle of a disciple. Moving forward, the Advisory Board requested regular updates to be particularly communicated to the Lead Minister and that the survey in Phase Two be moved to an online survey rather than a paper one so that it might increase the volume of responses. Further, they requested that the results of the survey also help shape the dynamics of the participation group.

¹⁰ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 34.

¹¹ Baker, *Centered-Set Church*, 146.

¹² *Ibid.*, 147.

Phase 2: Recruit Participation Group

Phase Two was initiated upon approval from the Advisory Board to send out the Grace-Based Discipleship Survey (Appendix C). Two adjustments were made to Phase Two. First, the Lead Minister and Advisory Board requested that the researcher meet with and update the Community and Connections Minister since the survey and participation group would involve those already participating under this ministry. The Community and Connections Minister requested that teachers, group leaders, and group facilitators be given notice prior to the survey being sent out in order that all group information and communication information was updated in the already existing groups database for SRCC.

Second, it was requested by the researcher to move the survey from a paper copy to an online format. The Advisory Board agreed with this change. The purpose of this change was to increase the efficiency with which the survey could be distributed and to increase the number of responses. Furthermore, the change also expedites the data gathering, analysis, and security of responses. The survey responses would then be password projected on the researcher's computer. The change to a digital format enables the researcher to accurately analyze the results and provides a better format for visualizing the quantitative data.

The scope and design of the research project entail research on the effects of the current discipleship model of SRCC. Therefore, 462 emails (Appendix B) were sent to members who are connected to small groups, men's and women's groups, and adult classes according to the SRCC database requested participation in the Participation Group Survey (PGS) (Appendix C). There were ninety-three responses to the survey. The PGS was also utilized for recruitment for the six-week participation group. In question 6, contributors were asked to respond with "yes" or "no" in their willingness to be a part of the participation group.

The participation group was limited to at least twelve and no more than fifteen. Fifty-three responded "yes," with thirty-eight providing contact information for follow-up. The researcher utilized the background information provided in questions one through five to select the group of fifteen. Seven women and eight men were selected based on their willingness to participate. The researcher recruited four from within the Participation Group for a focus group to fill out the Focus Group Questionnaire (Appendix F). The questionnaire is utilized to establish a beginning qualitative data point to measure the effectiveness of the six-week GBDA.

Participation Group (PG) members were solicited and given the starting and ending dates for the PG. They were also given preliminary purposes for the group to meet. The researcher also let them know that the project was both for the church and the researcher's thesis. Fifteen members agreed to participate. The researcher also secured a meeting room at the church to conduct the meetings. The space has tables and chairs, a television, a sound system, and a computer with internet access, as well as other presentation tools to aid in the meetings.

Phase 3: Administer Participation Group

The initial meeting was thirty minutes to introduce the project and provide details about the expectations of the participants. During the initial meeting, the researcher reminded the Participation Group that they must be over eighteen and already connected to the discipleship ministries of the church. A small classroom had to be utilized due to the set-up of SRCC's Vacation Bible School. All other meetings occurred in the large basement space with tables, chairs, and access to presentation equipment. The size of the classroom only allowed for questions that could be answered by the researcher, not discussion amongst the PG members. The researcher also stayed after the presentation to answer any questions that members wished to ask privately. In the initial meeting, the researcher provided the background, theological basis,

and potential impact on future discipleship ministry material to the Participation Group. The researcher also established expectations of attendance, contribution to reviews and discussions, as well as engagement with GBDA data. The researcher also solicited consent forms for participation (Appendix D). The researcher then answered any questions that were relevant to the Participation Group.

The next five meetings concerned the GBDA material. In the first meeting (Week 2), the GBDA curriculum covered the topic of grace. The researcher began by soliciting participants' understanding of the definition of grace and facilitated discussion. The discussion centered around common understandings of grace and whether their understandings were complete. The GBDA curriculum established an understanding of God's grace around the transformative presence of God in the life of the disciple. Then, the Participation Group examined four common contemporary legalistic approaches to the lifestyle of the disciple.¹³ These four were shown as: *God Owes*, where the orientation of the disciple is to do the right things so that God blesses in return; *God's Principles*, where the focus is on the tenants, principles, rules, or laws of the Bible but not necessarily needing God at all; *God's Offer*, where the disciple operates from the position of a consumer; and *God's Accomplisher*, where the discipleship lifestyle places the mission of a disciple as the irreducible center of the Christian life and the disciple tries to prove their value in the kingdom of God.¹⁴

¹³ Skye Jehani, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 52. Jehani calls these approaches "postures" and focuses on how an individual relates to God. This research modifies that view to include individual and corporate approaches to discipleship lifestyles. Jehani's "With" posture was presented as the ideal.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

Contemporary Legalistic Discipleship Positions			
<u>God Owes</u>	<u>God's Principles</u>	<u>God's Offer</u>	<u>God's Accomplisher</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing right to receive blessing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumerism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission-centered

Figure 3.6: Legalistic Postures

The researcher presented grace as the transformative presence of God as told by the narrative of the Bible (Gen 1 – 3; 1 Sam 8; Hos 6:4; 11:12; Joel 2:12, 13, 27; Matt 1:23; 28:18 – 20; Rev 21:3). The researcher asked how their understanding of grace and their orientation before God changes when God's presence is realized. They were challenged to think about how that affects what they believe about God, themselves, and others.

Week three was the examination of the first identifying mark of the discipleship lifestyle. The meeting was moved to a larger room where participants could sit five at a table. The researcher utilized presentation equipment to facilitate teaching and discussion. First, the Participation Group was asked to fill out the *Images of Jesus Questionnaire: Part 1* (Appendix H).¹⁵ The participants were then asked who God is, and the researcher facilitated questions based on the answers that were received. Participants were next asked how they knew their answers to be true. The exercise was done to show that God is who He reveals Himself to be and that the primary way this is done is through the Bible. The participants were asked to read and respond to three Scriptures: Psalm 119:25; 119:29; and 139:23. The task was designed to allow the truth of

¹⁵ Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 279 – 282. The questionnaire is the same exercise that McKnight utilized to show how individuals project their own image onto what they believe is the image of Jesus. The exercise shows how presumptions and the self influence disciples as they project those understandings onto the Bible. GBDA is concerned with reversing the projection so that the reader can experience the presence of God through the engagement of the Word of God.

the Bible to reveal lies and shortcomings in the reader so that the reader could identify the truth of God to replace those lies.

The participants were then asked to fill out part two of the questionnaire (Appendix H) and compare it to the first. The exercise exposed the participants to the research done by Francis and Astley that demonstrates the way one correlates one's own personality type to Jesus.¹⁶ The researcher showed how individuals also reflect on and interpret Scripture by reflecting on their own psychological preferences in the text.¹⁷ They were then challenged to engage the Bible personally and in a group. The researcher presented GBDA as understanding that Bible reading is not a solo exercise, but it is done with the understanding of practicing with God's presence. Questions and discussion concluded the meeting.

Week four covered the topic of prayer as an identifying mark of a disciple. The seminar began with the researcher revealing the results of the survey (Appendix C) and facilitating a discussion with the Participation Group concerning those results. Next, questions were asked concerning the need and routine of prayer in the lifestyle of the disciple. The class moved into a read and respond to three Scriptures detailing prayer: Matthew 6:9 – 13; Acts 12:12 – 17; 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18. Participants were asked to respond immediately, followed by questions facilitated by the researcher. Discussion for Matthew 6:9 – 13 was focused on the kingdom of God; expectation, and prayer for Acts 12:12 – 17; and the continuous nature of prayer was the focus for 1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 18.

¹⁶ L. J. Francis and J. Astley, "The Quest for the Psychological Jesus: Influences of Personality of Jesus," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 16, no. 3 (1997), 247.

¹⁷ L. J. Francis and Ap Siôn, T., "Jesus, Psychological Type and Conflict: A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics Applying the Reader Perspective and SIFT Approach to Mark 11:11 – 21," *Hervormde Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016), 9.

The researcher addressed the role of the Holy Spirit in the lifestyle of the disciple by focusing discussion on John 14:16 – 17 and 16:7 – 13. The purpose of the lecture was to bring all of the texts together in an understanding of prayer as an engagement with God, who is already present as grace-based discipleship. If Bible engagement was a realization of God's presence, then prayer is a response to His presence. All are participatory faith acts in grace stemming from the foundational questions concerning belief about God, the self, and others.

The last half of the meeting was spent in a prayer exercise designed to demonstrate the importance of community prayer life and personal exercises in prayer. The group was first divided into three groups of five. Each person in the group was assigned a topic and then instructed to pray out loud in their group concerning those topics. The five topics in each group were the workplace, community, church, family, and God's global mission. After that, each participant was instructed to move into pairs or groups of three. There were three paired-off and three groups of three. In the smaller groups, they were instructed to share one thing they wanted prayed for, and then their partners would pray for that request out loud. Each group was formed by gender, as there were three groups of women and three groups of men.

Next, participants were instructed to find a space around the room by themselves but in a place where they could see the screen. The researcher provided a guided prayer experience, and the participants were instructed to spend time praying alone through the instructions on the screen. After the prayer experience, the participants were brought back to their seats, and the researcher facilitated a debrief session about the experience. Then, the researcher connected the

experience back to Carney's table of intercessory prayer, which demonstrates prayer as spiritual development in an awareness of God's presence.¹⁸

The fifth week addressed transparency and confession as an identity mark of a disciple. The evening began with a discussion concerning identity that is discovered through basic needs being met. The PG was introduced to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and the researcher demonstrated how GBDA shows a deficiency in the hierarchy. GBDA does not produce a hierarchy that builds to completeness. Maslow says, "The appearance of one need usually rests on the satisfaction of another."¹⁹ In GBDA, the disciple starts with the greatest need met through the presence of God, who made Himself available for all who believe (Rom 5:5 – 11). Then, GBDA was presented to show God as the source of the disciple's love, belonging, security, and worth needs. The PG was asked to identify ways that these needs are met outside of God to show the contrast with God's grace.

Since God's grace was presented as the transformative presence of God, the hierarchy was shown to be a contemporary legalistic pattern. The group was asked to reflect on James 5:13 – 16. They identified ways that legalistic patterns of the hierarchy contribute to their weakened and feeble experiences. The PG then discussed the merits of 1 John 1:9 in relieving weariness to recognize God's presence in their lives. Confession was presented as both an individual experience (1 John 1:9) and a social experience (Jas 5:13 – 16) with elements of trust, vulnerability, belonging, and weakness.

The discussion of week five concluded with research published by Susan Mettes. The PG was asked to respond to Mettes: "Intimacy in our society has been defined more as need-

¹⁸ Carolyn Carney, *The Power of Group Prayer: How Intercession Transforms Us and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 5.

¹⁹ A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943), 370.

meeting...an error that steers us further from what it can actually be, causing us to eliminate relationships that are unsatisfying rather than address problems with the teamwork that comes with real intimacy.”²⁰ Mettes also recognized a gap between the cognitive and the spiritual that she did not know how to address. The PG was asked to discuss how GBDA could meet that need by recognizing worldly patterns of image and isolation against godly exercises of truth and transparency. A godly training regimen (1 Tim 4:7 – 8) was shown to have a place for self-reflection, identifying lies, and confession of sin for the purpose of spiritual development. The evening closed in silent prayer and then out loud by the researcher.

The final week covered the topic of evangelism and outreach. The GBDA identity needs were revisited. The researcher led a discussion over 1 Peter 3:13 – 17. The PG was divided into three tables, with five at each table. They were then asked to respond at their tables to the Scripture. Answers were solicited when the group convened. The PG was shown 2 Corinthians 5:11 – 6:2. The researcher emphasized the meaning of reconciliation. Next, the discussion centered on v. 20: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." The appeal is to "be reconciled to God." The researcher showed how the disciple no longer lives from a worldly point of view (5:16) but now sees others from God's perspective due to His presence with the disciple.

Outreach was identified in three aspects: service, proclamation/dialogue, and the sincere character of the disciple. Since the appeal is to be reconciled to God, the gospel definition was taught.²¹ The PG was shown that the gospel, then, is not a mere argument or debate but the story in which Jesus is the central figure. He is both the inspiration and substance of the gospel story.

²⁰ Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 12.

²¹ Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*, 52 and McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 49 served as starting points for understanding the gospel as the story of Jesus as the King.

No good news exists without Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. Since evangelism is an effort to listen and tell the story, the PG was asked to respond to this quote: "We live in a world that, for better or worse, most often seems to process through narrative, not facts."²² They were challenged with Beuchner's teaching: "It is absolutely crucial, therefore, to keep in constant touch with what is going on in your own life's story and to pay close attention to what is going on in the stories of others' lives. If God is present anywhere, it is in those stories that God is present. If God is not present in those stories, then they are scarcely worth telling."²³

The evening concluded with a presentation of the importance of the believer's testimony with a discussion of Revelation 12:11. Participants were asked to write down a brief testimony with the purpose of making an appeal to be reconciled to God. They were then asked to read it to someone at their table and discuss the different portions that they wrote. The researcher closed in prayer and thanked the participants for their willingness to be a part of the group.

Phase 4: Evaluation

Post-participation Group interviews were conducted with the Focus Group. The informal interviews were conducted in a discussion format and hosted individually. The researcher used the Focus Group Questionnaire (Appendix E) as the basis for the interview. Participants were asked about their answers, why they gave those answers, and how the GBDA experience would affect how they would answer those questions now. The Focus Group members were given an opportunity to discuss whether they saw the need for GBDA to be implemented church-wide. They evaluated the benefits and shortcomings of such an approach. The purpose of the Focus

²² Jennifer L. Holberg, *Nourishing Narratives: The Power of Story to Shape Our Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 3.

²³ Frederick Beuchner, *Beyond Words* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2004), 379.

Group members was to provide a direct conversation for the researcher to measure the efficacy and effectiveness of the GBDA Participation Group experience. The Focus Group also helped in providing a narrative for the survey data that was collected.

The researcher met with the Advisory Board for evaluation purposes after the PG experience. The Advisory Board responded very positively to the GBDA material and philosophy. It was decided that the content of the GBDA experience was of sound doctrine. The Advisory Board also noted that further discussions and plans for the discipleship ministry of SRCC to be evaluated need to occur at a future date.

Discussions centered around GBDA being "ground zero" for the ministry philosophy of SRCC. One member contended that curriculum, training, and a sermon series be developed out of GBDA. The Advisory Board also declared that further discussions should be had moving forward for staff and elders to go through the material together as a basis for further ministry. The purpose of this was to provide a common place for ministry operations. It was to take SRCC's "shotgun" ministry approach and focus ministry efforts from GBDA. "Not all good ideas are worth pursuing," said one member. The call to action was to make a concerted effort to connect SRCC's discipleship efforts to the purpose and mission of the church. Focused ministry efforts were discussed, and members left with a positive outlook for the future of SRCC.

Another concerted focus of discussion was on the presence of God, which was warranted, and plans to revisit the possibility of conducting GBDA was made. It was agreed that GBDA did not necessarily teach new doctrine, but it does provide grounds for discipleship operation. One of the things that was discussed positively was the experiential and relational aspects of GBDA. The Advisory Board also noted that GBDA needs to stay in connection with the church's counseling center as they foresee personal issues needing to be addressed, particularly when

GBDA's transparency is emphasized. They did not want to leave anyone vulnerable but wanted to ensure that the church was responsible in their ministry.

A future meeting date was secured for more discussion that is outside the purview of the scope of the research project. This meeting is for the purpose of planning the church-wide implementation of a grace-based approach at SRCC. In that meeting, GBDA priorities will be addressed and recommended, as well as the evaluation of the current discipleship ministry of SRCC. Overall, the Advisory Board was enthusiastic about a grace-based approach to making disciples.

Part of the discussions with the Advisory Board revolved around how to implement a grace-based discipleship ministry beyond a curriculum and the classroom. Among many avenues mentioned, addressing GBDA in a sermon series, leader training, and conducting broader research among the members and attendees of the church was discussed. Identifying the problem in a greater range was a critical element. This would represent a shift in approach for SRCC. A GBDA would be prescriptive and proactive rather than proscriptive and reactive. Much work is needed to arrive at this place, but this research project provides a critical element in moving toward it.

Once the evaluation is complete and the data is analyzed, recommendations can be made based on research. The researcher will work with church leadership in any action plans that are made. Further research may be required if the scope of the project is to be expanded beyond this action research. "Unless research participants take systematic steps to incorporate changed procedures into the ongoing life of the organization, changes are likely to be short-lived and to have little impact."²⁴ The church's systems of ministry are wide and complex. Sensing identifies

²⁴ Stringer, *Action Research*, 145.

three areas impacted by qualitative research: personal significance, ecclesial significance, and theological significance.²⁵ He illustrates his point as follows:

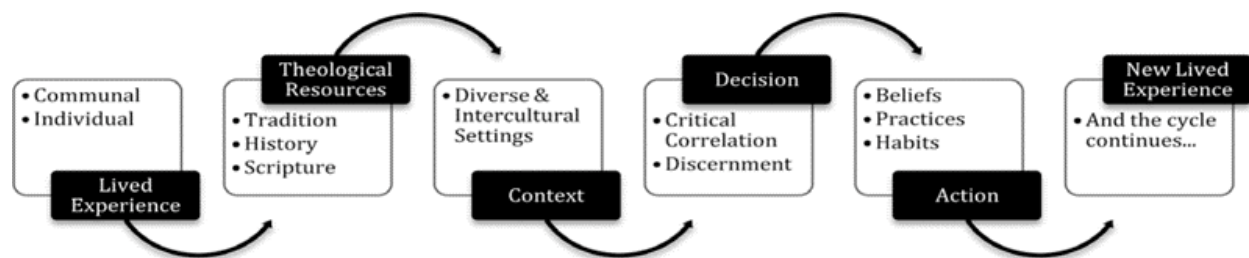


Figure 3.7: Sensing's Reflection Model²⁶

The Advisory Board, church leadership, ministry staff, and the researcher will need to not only take the research into consideration but also be willing to adapt to necessary changes in order to implement a systematic change in approach. Otherwise, the danger is just adding another ministry task to the existing options, thereby working against and competing with the already existing ministries of South Rock Christian Church.

²⁵ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 227 – 231.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Data Analysis Introduction

The aim of this research project has been to implement a ministry designed to educate, equip, and enrich the lifestyle of the disciples in South Rock Christian Church based on God's grace. This project addressed the problem of works-based faith from a contemporary legalistic mindset and was concerned with those already participating in the discipleship ministries of SRCC. Christians have demonstrated a proclivity to a "process of justification" through which receiving the grace of God is part of the salvation process that must be predicated on the proper preparation of receiving it.¹ Debates concerning the *ordo salutis* have been thoroughly recorded in history. The imputed justification debates of the order of salvation continue to identify grace as how a person is saved.² However, what this understanding fails to provide is the continuous work and presence of God's grace. The problem addressed with this project identifies this incomplete understanding of grace. God's grace is not just propositional truths of God, but how God reveals His presence with the disciple and how the disciple grows spiritually in godliness. Therefore, the problem was not whether SRCC members agree with propositional statements and doctrine that enter one into salvation, but the problem addressed the nature of the lifestyle of those who believe they are saved.

¹ Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 73.

² *Ibid.*, 75.

While measuring the effectiveness of the intervention may be difficult, the project does raise awareness not only of the problem but that a solution can be found with the intervention of ministry designed to educate and equip the disciple to live in God's grace rather than their own efforts. Following is an analysis of the quantitative data that present gaps between the beliefs and actions of the members of SRCC, while the qualitative data sheds light on the problem as well as the enrichment provided by the intervention.

The four identifying marks of a disciple were assessed. Those identifying marks are experienced and expressed in two facets: individually and corporately. The qualitative research was able to create a snapshot of participants' interaction in both facets concerning all four marks. A Participation Group was assessed for six weeks, covering grace and the four identity marks. The analysis shows how the qualitative data was able to provide a narrative to the quantitative research. Interviews with the Advisory Board were able to provide context to the data, and research with the Focus Group was able to provide results of the intervention.

The action research was gathered in four phases. Phase One was soliciting leadership approval and conducting initial informal interviews with the Advisory Board. Phase Two was soliciting permission for the survey sent to members of SRCC connected to discipleship ministries, recruiting the Participation Group, and establishing the Focus Group. Phase Three was conducting the Participation Group class and hosting interviews for the Focus Group. Phase Four included evaluating the Participation Group experience, Focus Group interviews, and Advisory Board interviews.

The following is an analysis of the quantitative data collected through the survey conducted in Phase Two and the qualitative data collected in Phase Three and Four. It is also a

report of the methodology and an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention design.

Gathering Data

One of the primary purposes of action research is to “provide people with the capacity to engage in a systematic inquiry and investigation to discover effective ways of resolving problems and issues experienced in their work or community lives.”³ This research utilized a survey (Appendix C) to measure the engagement of the four identifying marks of a disciple at SRCC. The participants of the survey were already connected to the discipleship ministry of SRCC. Contributors were asked a series of ten questions in each of the four categories, which resulted in ninety-three responses.

Of the ninety-three respondents, 27 percent marked that they have attended SRCC between zero and five years, 37 percent between six and fifteen years, 15 percent between sixteen and twenty-five years, and 14 percent have attended twenty-six or more years at SRCC. None have considered themselves Christians less than five years, 8 percent identified with the Christian faith between six and fifteen years, 9 percent between sixteen and twenty-five years, and 76 percent more than twenty-six years.

³ Ernest T. Stringer and Alfredo O. Aragón, *Action Research*, 5th ed, (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2020), 7.

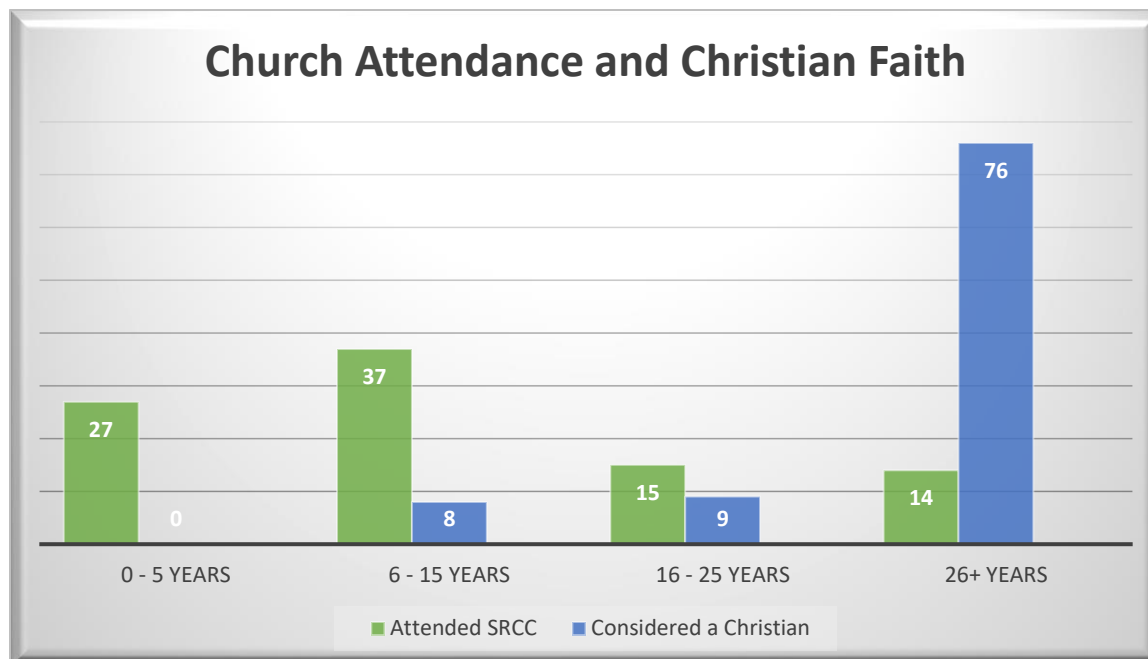


Figure 4.1: Attendance vs. Years of Faith

Three-quarters of the respondents have been involved with the Christian faith for twenty-six years or more, while more than three-quarters (86%) have been involved with SRCC for less than twenty-five years. This indicates that the majority of SRCC members come from a mixed ecclesiological background. The more churches involved in the education of a disciple could mean more mixed messages concerning the lifestyle of the believer.

The overwhelming majority of those surveyed claim to attend a church service mostly every week (92%), with the rest attending at least monthly (3%) or two to three times a month (5%). This indicates that those who participated in the polling would be familiar with the teaching and preaching of SRCC. High levels of participation in the marks of a disciple were expected.

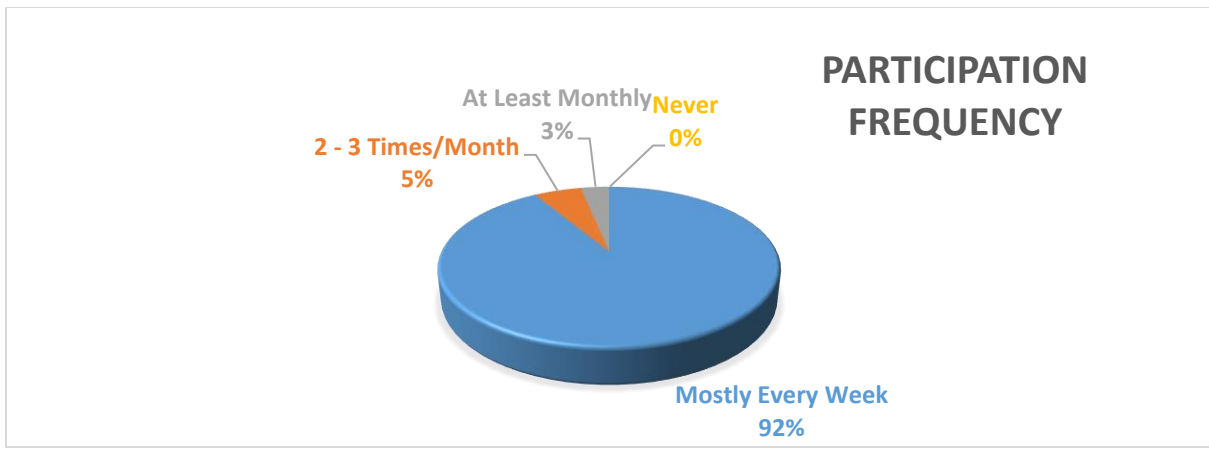


Figure 4.2: Participation Frequency

In each of the four categories comprising the four identity marks of a disciple (Bible, prayer, transparency, and outreach), contributors were surveyed with ten questions. They were to rank their level of participation as "always," "almost always," "occasionally," "not very often," or "not at all." Each of those responses was ranked 5 through 1, respectively. The scores are reported below for each category.

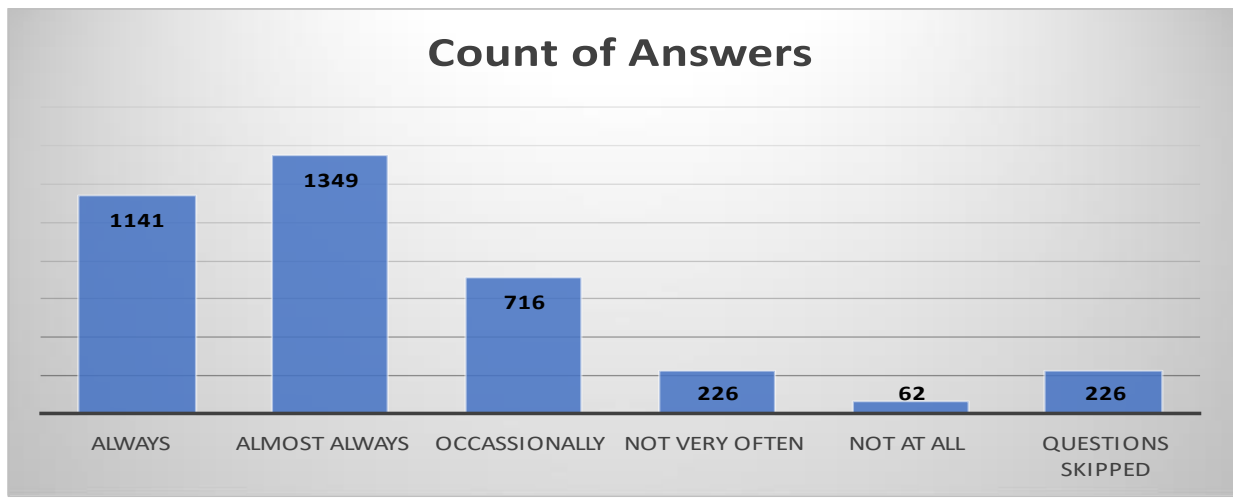


Figure 4.3: Overall Survey Count of Answers

The forty questions were then separated into “belief” and “action” questions measuring agreement in belief and those that the respondents were doing. Sixteen belief questions and twenty-four action questions were posed. The purpose was to measure the distance between stated beliefs and actions flowing from those beliefs. Then, GBDA could address the gap between the two and, perhaps, identify why a gap exists.

The Participation Group was utilized in the action research to be able to address educational concerns of a grace-based discipleship lifestyle. The PG was able to tell a qualitative narrative of quantitative research. Fifteen participants were selected from the survey participants, seven male and eight female. Each week, they were presented with a biblical message on the topic and asked to participate in the discussion and respond to questions. Responses and answers were evaluated by the researcher to better understand the position of the members of SRCC while also helping to facilitate spiritual development within the GBDA.

The PG functioned primarily as qualitative research. Sensing described qualitative research within a ministry context as "complex dynamics of a particular location and theology." He identified two consequences of the research: first is transformation beyond mental acknowledgment to commitment and living experience, and second, growth in theological understandings. Sensing says, "Practical theology enhances the critical correlation between experience and theology so that both these activities will occur more often."⁴ It is for this purpose that the PG existed. Therefore, the quantitative data was better implemented and understood through qualitative research.

⁴ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, xv–xvi.

Quantitative Data Analysis

As expected, scores were reported relatively high in each category. Prayer was rated highest (4.253), transparency next highest (3.998), with Bible engagement close after (3.995), and then Outreach (3.797).

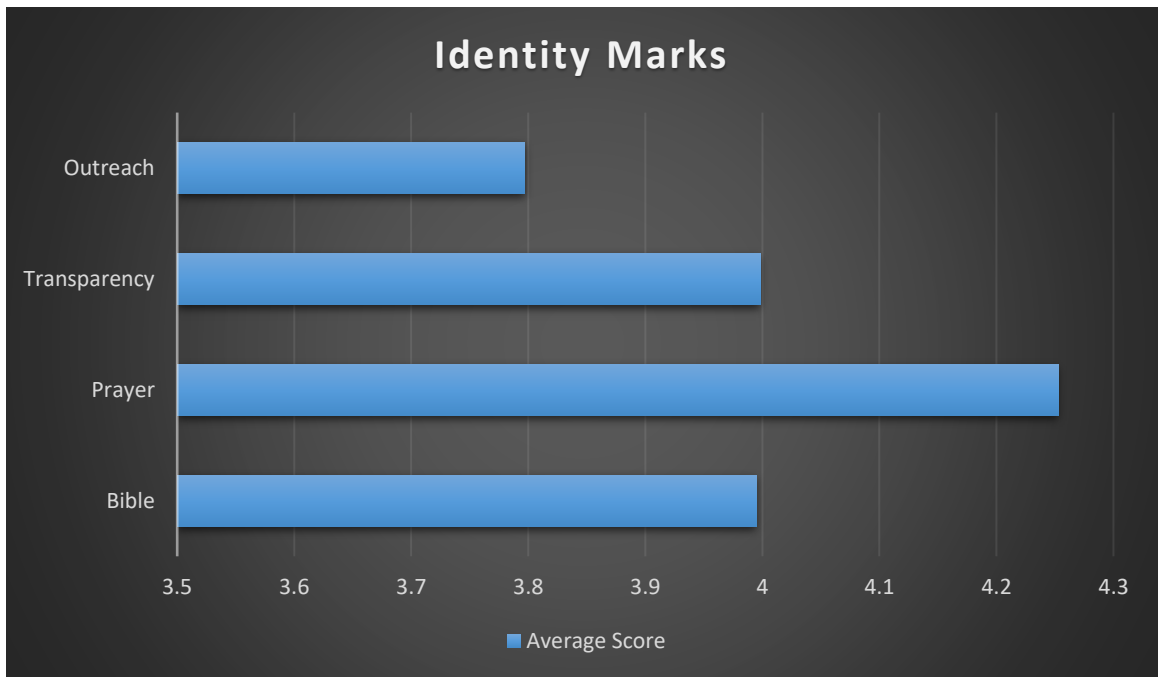


Figure 4.4. Average Score of Identity Marks

The bigger and more relevant story, though, occurs when answers are revealed between the belief and action questions.

Table 4.1: Average Score and Percentage of Belief vs. Action Questions

Mark	Descriptor	Avg	Always (%)	Almost Always (%)	Occasionally (%)	Not Very Often (%)	Not at All (%)
Transparency	Belief	4.312	45.91%	39.89%	12.33%	1.40%	0.47%
Transparency	Action	3.684	19.95%	37.59%	26.40%	13.74%	2.32%

Outreach/	Belief	4.260	55.96%	20.83%	17.26%	4.76%	1.19%
Outreach	Action	3.681	21.03%	38.47%	29.84%	9.16%	1.50%
Prayer	Belief	4.270	44.39%	34.20%	17.65%	3.38%	0.37%
Prayer	Action	4.228	34.24%	30.06%	18.47%	10.30%	6.95%
Read Bible	Belief	4.177	43.65%	37.29%	14.19%	2.99%	1.87%
Read Bible	Action	3.917	23.08%	52.12%	19.31%	4.55%	0.94%

The largest gaps between belief and action question responses were in the transparency category, then outreach, then Bible, and then prayer. SRCC members were more likely to follow through with their belief in prayer than in any other category. When presented to the Participation Group, the common response was that prayer is understood as a personal action. Corporately, members identified prayer with listening not just to God but to the one performing the prayer. When asked if they would be more likely to lead a public prayer out loud, more resistance was portrayed, and they equated that experience with public speaking rather than recognizing the presence of God. Praying out loud may represent more of the transparency identity mark than the prayer one, as members indicated more vulnerability in that context.

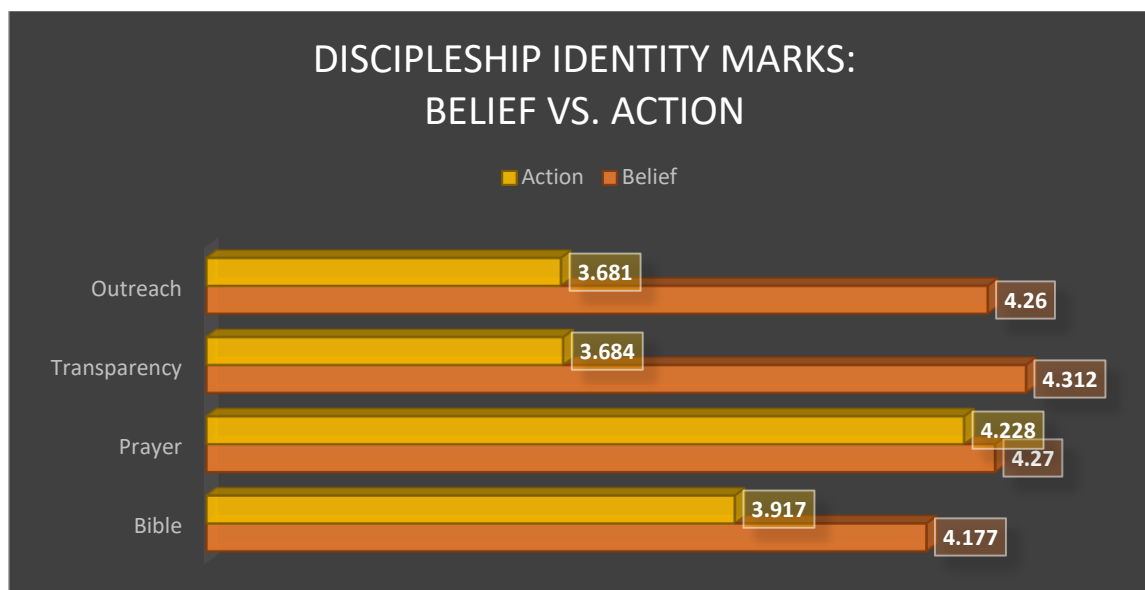


Figure 4.5: Discipleship Identity Marks: Belief vs. Action Average Scores

GBDA must address the gap between belief and action. It is possible that the members of SRCC who are connected to the discipleship ministries of the church do not have a faith issue but a works issue. However, obedience may not be the heart of the matter either. It is possible that SRCC members are attempting to work based on their own efforts, which are coming up short. While interviewing the Focus Group post-PG, one member suggested that the material was not new to her. "While I have known much of that information, GBDA provided a foundational perspective that brings forth intentionality," she said. This suggests a course correction in worldview was experienced. "From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer" (2 Cor 5:16, ESV). While SRCC could have an obedience issue, it is at least just as likely that they have a perspective issue concerning the work of God, particularly if grace is understood as God's transformative presence in the life of the disciple.

With the high number connected to regular attendance plus the gap between action and belief scores, there could be a correlation between action and a misunderstanding of faith. If God's grace is understood as merely a covering of sin or an entry point into eternal life, then obedience could be seen as a hobby rather than habitual.

The data suggests another element at large. Since the smallest gap exists between the belief and action responses in prayer, then it could possibly be understood as prayer being the most personal of the identity marks. Transparency requires honesty that goes beyond fear. If fear is the dominant factor preventing the action from matching the belief, then a contemporary legalistic mindset is still at play. A lack of trust may be what is at the center of acting upon a belief. And, if belief is understood only as an agreement upon a certain set of propositional statements rather than the foundation of a disciple's lifestyle, then GBDA is an appropriate movement to begin living in faith rather than working toward it.

Fear was shown to be a primary factor and hurdle in the lifestyle of the disciple. Susan Mettes suggests that contemporary concerns for intimacy exist because it is now defined more in terms of need-meeting, which she believes is a result of consumer culture at large.⁵ Discussion in PG demonstrated that this false belief goes beyond the context of intimacy, though. One PG member stated, "I don't always think of my church experience in terms of God's presence, but about what I can learn about Him." In other words, she confessed she approaches the corporate experience of discipleship in terms of what she can gain rather than how she can participate, at least some of the time.

⁵ Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 12. Here, quotes and material from Mettes' work were used in Week 5 of the PG.

If fear is a primary motivator, then the gaps in action versus belief need to be understood with this in mind. Commenting on the university experience, James K. A. Smith describes a difference between the classroom experience (where one gains knowledge for a career) and the extracurricular experience (where “real world” experience is formative). He states: “In short, while the official story tells us that it’s what we’re learning in the classroom that will prepare us to be productive members of society, it is actually the rituals of the university outside the classroom that constitute the most formative aspect of our education.”⁶ The same could be said for the church experience, at least for SRCC. Most of the time, resources and energy are pointed toward the weekend experience. This creates the greatest expectation: going to church. If church attendance is the highest level of expectation, then the lifestyle of the disciple is a result of church attendance, at best, and a wishful desire, at least.

While church attendance is desirable, GBDA is important because it emphasizes a life lived from the grace of God, which is preached and taught in the SRCC weekend experience. The primary expectation, then, is not content used to convince attendees to consume. Rather, the expectation becomes about living a life from the grace of God. The SRCC disciple's life, then, is a work that reflects the grace that they have already received. The apostle Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12b – 13, ESV).

Another result of fear is isolation, which leads to loneliness. When that happens to the churchgoer, participation in the grace of God is non-existent. One intervention suggests that this is a result of a false mindset. The remedy was "to teach lonely individuals to identify automatic

⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 117.

negative thoughts and regard them as hypotheses to be tested rather than facts."⁷ In some sense, this is the essence of GBDA, only GBDA approaches the lack of participation as a spiritual matter rather than a sociological one. Instead of allowing fear to pull the disciple away from participation, the disciple is encouraged to consider the possibility of God already present with them. "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:31b – 32, ESV).

Ultimately, if the SRCC disciple of Christ still lives based on fear, then contemporary legalism is still a factor. A grace-based discipleship approach would address the gap between the action and belief questions because it teaches and assumes the already present Spirit with the disciple. A new perspective of God, self, and others would be encouraged and practiced by engagement with God's Word, prayer, confession, and service.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data tells a fuller narrative of the quantitative information. To understand the nature of GBDA's impacts on SRCC's discipleship efforts, a qualitative analysis of the problem needed to occur. The qualitative data of GBDA was bulky and required structure for meaningful analysis.⁸ The focus of this action research was how GBDA addresses the problem of a contemporary legalistic discipleship lifestyle, even if that lifestyle is not the intended outcome.

In week two of GBDA, the group started with a discussion of grace. A simple definition was solicited by the researcher. Common answers to questions concerning the definition of grace

⁷ Christopher M. Masi et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Interventions to Reduce Loneliness," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 3 (2011), 223.

⁸ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 57 – 58.

were given and lined up closely with Barclay's incomplete understanding.⁹ Most expressed grace in terms of salvation that is freely given conducive to forgiveness, resulting in thanksgiving. The thick description, however, looks behind the stated responses. Were participants trying to give the "right" answers in the church setting? It is possible that thoughtfulness has not been applied to charisological understandings.

The gaps between belief and action could be rooted in a misunderstanding of God's grace. Initial reports suggest that grace was understood as an entry point into the Christian life when, in fact, GBDA defined grace as the sustaining element of the disciple's lifestyle as it is the presence of God in the believer. Paul states, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Col 2:6 – 7, ESV). The phrases "in him," "in the faith," and "in thanksgiving" are the results of those who have "received Christ Jesus the Lord." This sums up the identity of GBDA. Participants were shown the four basic approaches in contemporary legalistic lifestyles and asked to describe the one they most closely resembled. The group was closely divided between God's Principles Approach (7) and the Accomplishing for God Approach (8).¹⁰ GBDA was then applied to that understanding.

When presented with GBDA, participants could recognize a lack of understanding of grace. Starting with God's presence provided a shift in the group's discussion, and they were able to identify misplaced belief in themselves and how they viewed others. Providing a structure of treasuring God above all, realizing union with God through Jesus is already established, and

⁹ Barclay, *Paul and the Power of Grace*, 2.

¹⁰ Jethani, *With*, 41 – 60 and 77 – 96.

faithfully pursuing experiential life with God enabled participants to have clarity while looking back on their life in the Christian faith.

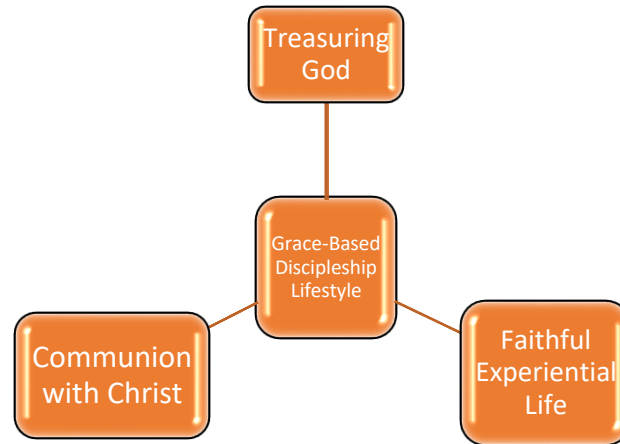


Figure 4.6: GBDA Lifestyle Structure Illustration

Since the purpose of the action research was to implement a ministry that educated, equipped, and enriched the discipleship lifestyle of the Christian believer in God's grace, the remaining four weeks focused on the four identity marks of the disciple as described in the Bible. Each of those four weeks contained three elements: a presentation by the researcher on the topic, discussion question and answer time, and a reflective activity. All of these occurred in each hour-long session.

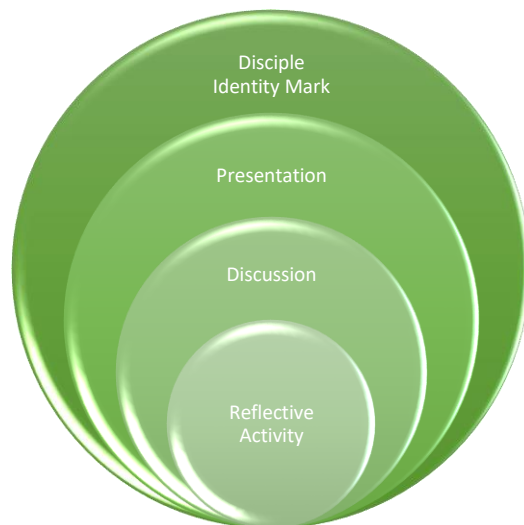


Figure 4.7: Participation Group Structure

Week three addressed the topic of engagement with the Bible. The PG reported high levels of both belief and action regarding the Bible, with 80 percent reporting they "Always" or "Almost Always" respond in belief, and 75 percent "Always" or "Almost Always" participate in the action of reading Scripture. The presentation of the Bible did not focus so much on what the Bible is as it did on what happens to the disciple; they engage with the Scriptures as an act of realizing the grace of God.

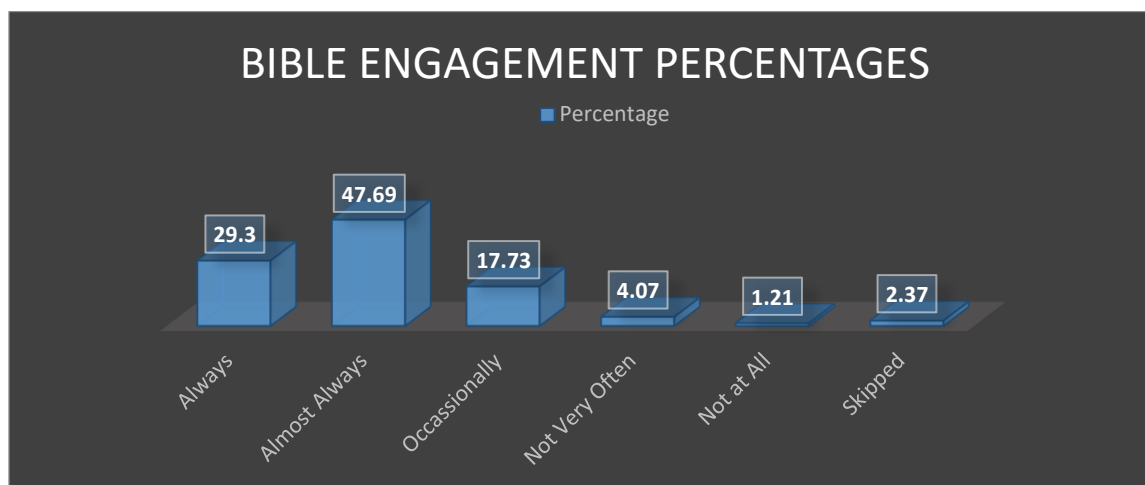


Figure 4.8: Bible Engagement Percentages Results

When participants were presented with Psalm 119:25, 29, and 139:23, they collectively expressed agreement with the truth of these texts. When questioned about how and if they practice the truth of those Scriptures, answers did not return as positive. Most identified forces that worked against practicing these truths.

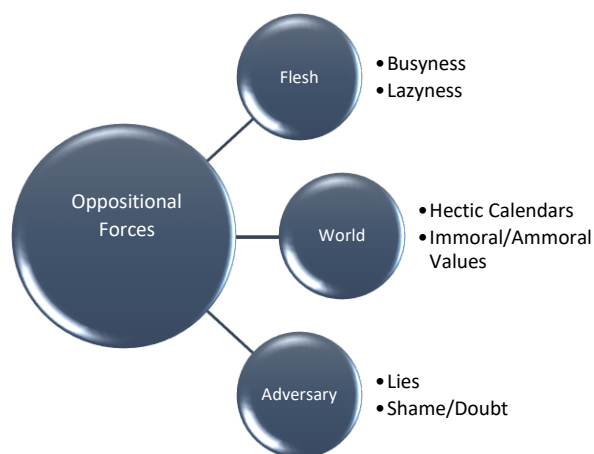


Figure 4.9: Oppositional Forces Illustration

Some suggested busyness and hectic schedules and lifestyles that keep them from this type of engagement with God’s Word. These patterns were identified as “the world.” Others talked about laziness within themselves. This pattern was identified as “the flesh.” Another common appeal was to spiritual forces and an adversary who works against spiritual practices such as Scripture engagement. This was called “the enemy.”

GBDA approached Bible engagement as an act of recognizing God’s presence. The quest is to seek God with the disciple in His Word. PG participants expressed a type of freedom that is experienced when God’s Word is understood as His revelation to His people rather than reading Scripture as an assignment to do or a type of Christian duty to be accomplished. Grace gets to be experienced.

In a reflective activity, PG members self-evaluated using the questionnaire in Appendix H. They demonstrated similar results that McKnight reports with his classes. McKnight provides a questionnaire (Appendix H) to his classes and demonstrates how Bible readers are “Rorschachers” projecting the readers’ image onto Jesus. “Reading the Bible becomes patting ourselves on the back and finding our story in the Bible, instead of finding the Bible’s story to be our story...Instead of entering into that story, we manipulate the story so it enters into our story.”¹¹ The PG demonstrated similar Bible engagement effects. It becomes an act of attrition as the reader tends to “project onto Jesus [their] own image.”¹²

Participants were also exposed to the work of L. J. Francis and Ap Siôn, which showed how the reader's personality type is what typically influences the understanding and practice of the text more than the truth of the Scripture.¹³ Participants became aware of the need to guard against injecting themselves into the text and allowing the text to shape their lifestyles. This is the act of exchanging a lie for the truth and addresses the Christian at the belief level.

Week four addressed the topic of prayer. As prayer ranked as the highest identity mark on the survey with an average score of 4.253, it also had the smallest discrepancy between the action and belief questions, with a gap of only .042. This suggests that members are more familiar with this identity mark and practice prayer on a more regular basis. However, 9.24 percent marked "Not Very Often" or "Never" in the prayer action category. The PG experience suggests that this might be because prayer is viewed largely as only a personal activity and that prayer in a corporate setting is a performative act very much in the same style as giving a public speech. Most members shied away from that aspect of prayer.

¹¹ McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, 49.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Francis and Ap Siôn, “Jesus, Psychological Type and Conflict,” 9.

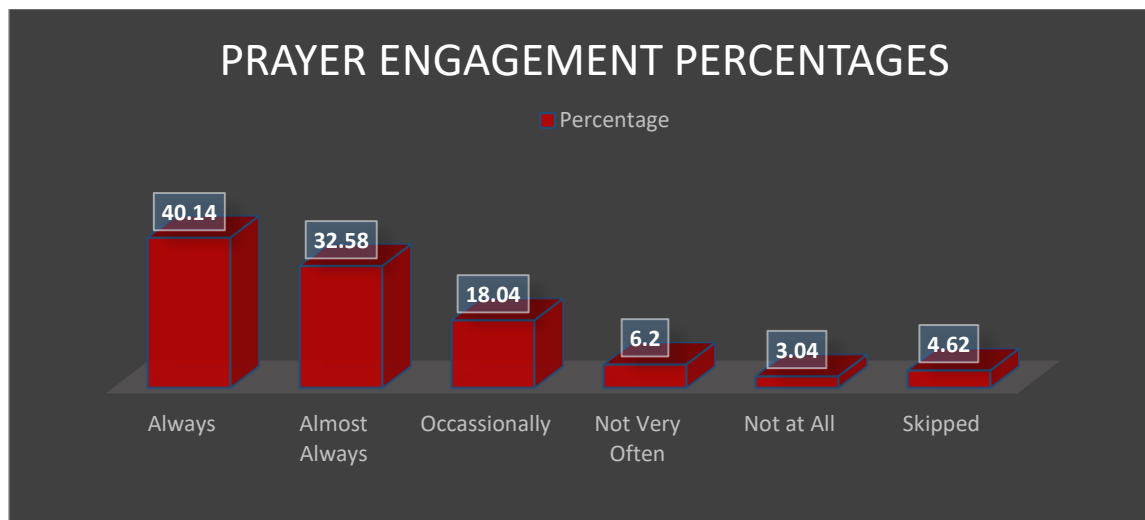


Figure 4.10: Prayer Engagement Percentages Results

The researcher presented Matthew 6:9 – 13, Acts 12:12 – 17, and 1 Thessalonians 5:17 for the basis of the GBDA approach to prayer. The discussion concentrated on these texts. PG members recognized the rhythmic, relational, and conversational aspects of prayer as presented in these three Scriptures. They also discussed the necessity to listen while praying. If prayer is strictly a performance (work), then it is also a lack of understanding of who God reveals Himself to be. PG representatives were more familiar with supplication prayers than any other types. GBDA presented prayer as an identifying mark of the disciple as exemplified in the three texts, but not as a one-sided speech to make either to God or in front of others. Instead, prayer was presented to participate in the transformative presence of God. When presented as grace-based, PG members were able to explore prayer with greater enthusiasm.

The reflective activity was experienced in the last half of the class. First, they prayed in their larger groups at their tables. Each had a specific topic to pray about. Next, they were split into groups of 2 or 3 and instructed to pray for specific things mentioned by those members in their groups. Last, they spread out in the room and prayed as they were guided on the screen.

Most expressed thanksgiving for the time carved out to do this activity. Some reported anxiousness when assigned to pray out loud within a group. One member said they were constantly thinking about what to say and did not listen to what the others were saying in their prayer out loud. One member refused to participate in the two group portions, reporting that they did not respond well in group activities. Another group in the second portion never got to praying as they used up the time sharing what was going on in their lives and getting to know one another.

The PG reported the most positive responses in the solo portion. Some said they have never stopped to listen to what God might be saying regarding their prayer time. They contributed this to the work of the Holy Spirit. GBDA identified prayer not as a task or a report but as a response to the presence of God. Prayer, then, is exploring God and His goodness. It is an act that responds to belief rather than offering up a wish or a demonstration in front of a crowd. Members reported more motivation and less fear when coming from the GBDA understanding.

In week five, GBDA covered the topic of confession and transparency. This identity mark displayed the greatest discrepancy between belief and action, with a belief-action gap of .628. PG members posited potential reasons such as vulnerability, lack of trust, loneliness, and unidentified weakness. They recognized not just a belief that transparency should be an identifying mark but a deep desire for it to be true in their experience. However, fear often determines the act of being transparent.

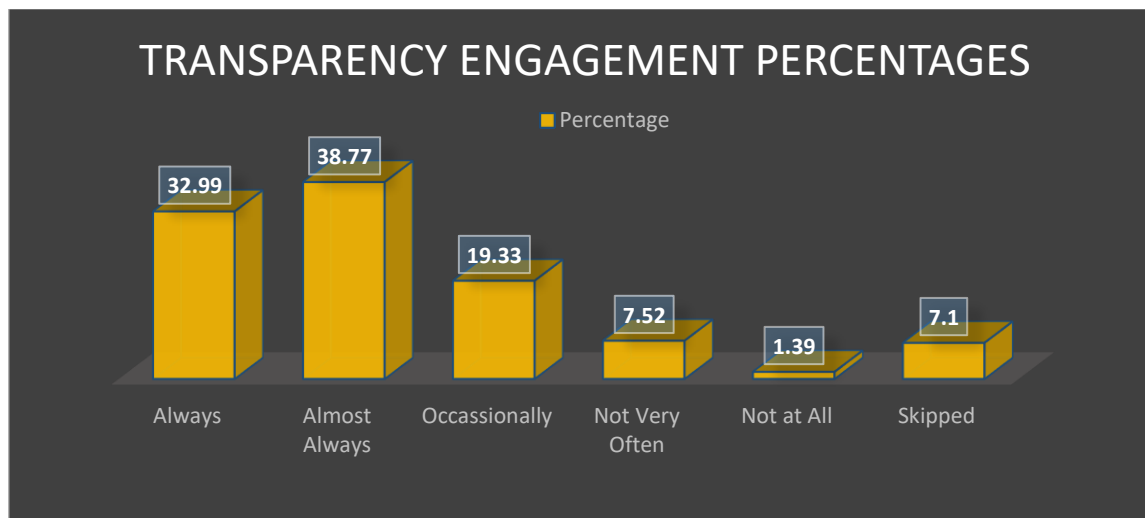


Figure 4.11: Transparency Engagement Percentages Results

The researcher presented four buckets that were labeled “Love,” “Belonging,” “Security,” and “Worth.” GBDA contends that God is the source for these four needs to be met. This counters popular identity teaching and understanding such as Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs*, which contends that these needs are met only after the more basic need is satisfied.¹⁴ The gospel, on the other hand, meets these needs through the work of Christ and the calling of the Holy Spirit. PG members were able to identify a more accurate worldview based on the already completed work of Christ on the cross and victory with the resurrection.

Participants were instructed to discuss James 5:13 – 16 and 1 John 1:9. They identified growth opportunities in what they called "horizontal transparency" in James 5 and "vertical confession" in 1 John 1. Susan Mettes contends that the current cultural climate treats relationships as transactional, an effect of a consumeristic culture that has invaded the church. Consumerism resulting in transactional-level relationships impairs the ability to self-regulate, so

¹⁴ Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” 370.

people often respond by projecting their brokenness into social situations. She refers to the “spotlight effect,” which is the belief of being rejected even if it is untrue. The result is social isolation.¹⁵ Discussion for PG concerned how this affects the disciple spiritually.

PG members recognized efforts to present themselves as "status." According to the discussion, this is when one presents oneself as a status would be presented on a social media platform. It results not just in transactional relationships (need-meeting) but in superficial experiences with God. GBDA counters this cultural phenomenon by realizing God's presence is already there by His grace. God's transformative grace eliminates the need for pretension.

The reflective activity for participants was to identify different ways that they attempt to meet the needs listed on the buckets. Those were written on a whiteboard. They were then asked to reflect on various Scriptures (Rom 12:1 – 2; 1 Tim 4:7 – 8; Jas 5:13 – 16; and 1 John 1:9). Members were to journal and discuss the differences they came up with compared to what they read in Scripture. Overall, they reported satisfaction with the lesson. They were able to identify lies and demonstrate what the truth is to combat them. Transparency results when God's presence is acknowledged and disciples engage with Him in an honest and vulnerable way.

Week six addressed the topic of evangelism and outreach. This category was the lowest ranked mark of the survey, with an average score of 3.797. The PG identified service, word, integrity, and testimony as the primary means of conveying the gospel to the lost. When asked why they believed this to be the lowest score, fear was an influence, once again. However, one member mentioned a “New Year’s Resolution Effect” that was defined as believing something is a good idea, but the practice of it fades away after a period of time much as many New Year’s resolutions do in February.

¹⁵ Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 75 – 80.

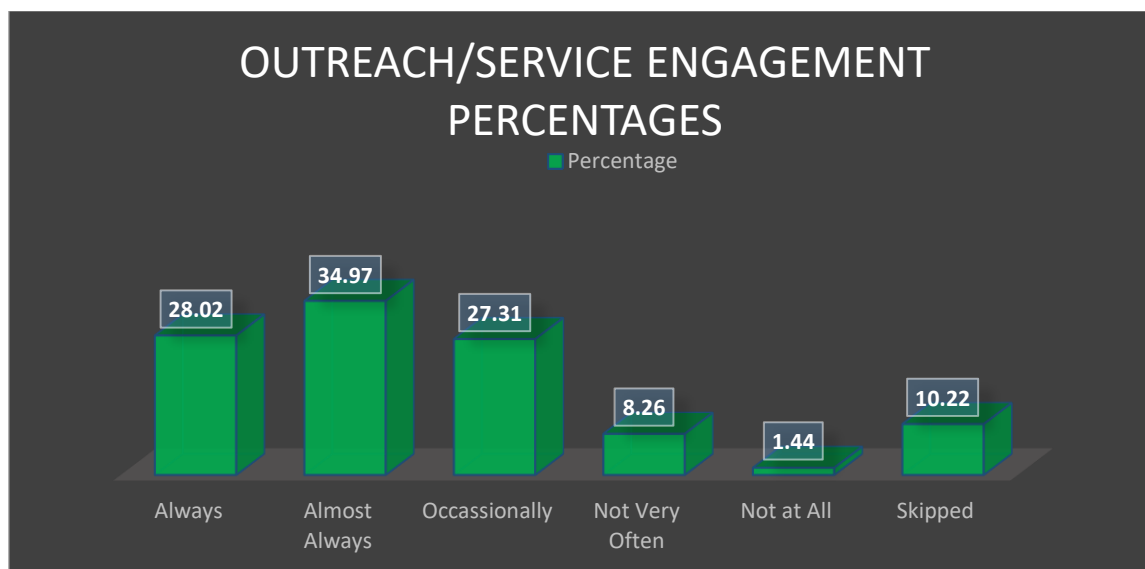


Figure 4.12: Outreach/Service Engagement Percentages Results

The researcher asked if this is the consequence of believing positive evangelistic experiences happen due to the disciples' own ability and strategic planning rather than by the strength of God. The group agreed and then were presented with 1 Peter 4:13 – 17, to show that outreach was an apologetic act, and 2 Corinthians 5:11 – 6:2, to demonstrate that outreach is also a spiritual exercise.

The PG agreed with the need to share the gospel with a broken and lost world but expressed exasperation at not always knowing where to start. They also shared how it feels like someone else's eternity rests on their shoulders and "knowing all the answers." GBDA suggests evangelism to be an act of God's grace, not the disciples' talent. With this understanding, PG members said they could envision more liberty to express the gospel. They also identified the urgency to know God for themselves. One member asked, "How can I tell of Jesus if I don't know who he is? I may know about Him, but outreach starts inwardly." This is the essence of GBDA.

The reflective activity was two-fold. First, PG participants were asked to identify what the gospel is. The collective answer resembled much of McKnight's.¹⁶ However, the group was also able to identify the need to live as part of God's kingdom rather than according to worldly currents. GBDA renders this a victorious realization and evidence that GBDA is working. Second, they were assigned to respond to the quote: "The mission is not a task to be assigned to a few chosen representatives, but a task for the whole Church, since the Church represents to the world what Christ is."¹⁷ They were able to recognize the church as a unified body utilized as a vessel to communicate this message to the world. They reported that it essentially necessitates conviction from the body rather than just the skill of a few individuals. The PG also noted that when the entire church works together, fear is alleviated. GBDA is a demonstration of God's grace by His transformative presence.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Consensus demonstrated that the action research achieved its goal to educate, equip, and enrich the life of the disciple by demonstrating a lifestyle rooted in the presence of Christ. This is the essence of grace-based discipleship and the approach taken by the intervention. GBDA did succeed at addressing the problem of contemporary legalism in the disciples of SRCC. Patton describes the heuristic analysis of qualitative research as "immersion, incubation, illumination,

¹⁶ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 49 – 52. McKnight identifies the gospel in narrative terms. His gospel definition is that Jesus: Preexisted with the Father; took on human flesh; died for sins; was buried; was raised on the third day; appeared to many; ascended to the Father; and will come again.

¹⁷ Morna D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 18.

explication, and creative synthesis.”¹⁸ It is on this basis that both strengths and weaknesses were identified.

The project did engage the experiences of the participants through quantitative surveys and qualitative involvement of the Participation Group. Furthermore, the Focus Group included two males and two females. The two males were twenty-seven and thirty-nine years old, while the two females were forty and forty-eight years old. All four described GBDA as a needed direction for SRCC. One male (27) and one female (48) both reflected how GBDA equipped them and educated them for spiritual growth in an informal interview. One said, "I hope this is a direction that will impact [SRCC] at the most basic level." She indicated the need for grace-based discipleship not just in educational ministries but in all that SRCC does. This comment also addresses GBDA at the incubation level. Adding another ministry to the long list of SRCC ministries is not ideal. Instead, GBDA aimed to address the core ministry of making disciples.

Growing awareness of God's presence was the thematic element of the PG members' experience. The forty-year-old Focus Group female described her experience as a lens through which to view her discipleship involvement. The researcher believes this to be a movement in the correct direction. Holberg describes this type of discovery as the result of "articulating and interrogating" to reveal a worldview. She says that even these types of realizations in "a small way is a start."¹⁹

Areas for improvement were discovered in the survey analysis. Some suggested that a few of the questions were vague and left up to interpretation. For example, question forty-five asked whether the participant intentionally engages non-Christians about the Christian faith.

¹⁸ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 486.

¹⁹ Holberg, *Nourishing Narratives*, 156 – 157.

Some ambiguity was shown in the PG's response to that question. There were some who wondered if the question was asking if a Christian should engage, while others understood the question as asking about their current discipleship experience. Clarity in the questions of the survey could lead to better experience and more concrete answers.

Grace was also still described by the Focus Group members in an ambiguous way. One said that he "didn't need another lesson on grace, but a lesson on what to do with it." The explanation needs to be clearer. The hour-long weekly experience of the PG did not provide enough time to refine explanations. However, the twenty-seven-year-old male of the Focus Group described putting his GBDA experience into practice involving a situation that required him to confront sin. He said, "Instead of accusing, I decided to seek God and His truth. It was His grace that dictated the confrontation, giving [the other person] the benefit of the doubt." In this case, creative synthesis brought GBDA together in a productive fashion.

While GBDA did effectively address the contemporary legalistic problem of the members of SRCC, it does not go far enough to become the fabric of the disciples' lives yet. A six-week experience does not mean that the problem is solved. A new metric for measuring disciples is needed for SRCC. There was no test that was given to see if the PG members were able to replicate the GBDA experience for others. Therefore, the stability of GBDA is yet to be determined. The hope of the researcher is that GBDA can begin the conversation at the fundamental discipleship level of SRCC, and new ministry cannot only be revealed but replace the incomplete or ineffective discipleship efforts of SRCC.

Many strengths were experienced through GBDA. The PG members showed that GBDA was a worthwhile pursuit, and the Advisory Board demonstrated a desire for GBDA to renovate the discipling efforts of SRCC. Meanwhile, survey results could be construed as mixed since

clarity in the questioning could have been sharper. Also, a six-week one-hour session may not solve the problem of SRCC members living from a legalistic standpoint, but it only serves as a starting place for grace-based living to incur. SRCC has more work to do in intervening in its discipleship challenges, but GBDA gives a healthy and holistic place to start.

Deep reflection was experienced through the final meeting with the Advisory Board. One Board member suggested that curriculum, small group leader training, staff training, and elder retreats occur over GBDA. No one suggested that GBDA material was new or ground-breaking; however, the Advisory Board demonstrated that GBDA should become a priority that impacts SRCC at every level. The researcher contended that GBDA should not become "another thing to fill the church calendar." The Advisory Board agreed and indicated that GBDA become a place for SRCC to align all ministries.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

At the outset, this project set out to address a spiritual development problem with the adult members of South Rock Christian Church. Chapter One of the action research described the ministry setting of SRCC as one that is increasing in attendance but still lacks a focused identity not in mission but in action. The stated mission of SRCC is to "Help people find and follow Jesus." The problem addressed in this action research is not about convincing the church of the mission but of the implications of following Jesus. Therefore, the project sought to address the ontology of SRCC and the spiritual identity of the church. That identity is often thought of in terms of mission, but this project sought to address the lifestyle of SRCC's adult disciples in terms of the grace of God.

The purpose of the project was to implement a ministry structure that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian life based on God's grace. A survey was presented to adults already participating in the discipleship ministries of the church. It provided quantitative data demonstrating SRCC's beliefs against actions. The qualitative experience implemented an educational six-week experience addressing the nature of God's grace in adult disciples of the church. The Grace-Based Discipleship Approach defines God's grace as His presence with those who believe in Christ, which leads to transformation through engagement with the Word of God, prayer, truthful confession, and evangelistic efforts. The qualitative program provided the narrative of the qualitative data.

This action research recognizes numerous approaches in discipleship that already exist but seeks to focus on the ministry of SRCC adults as participatory faith resulting from the

identity of the one who already claims salvation in Christ. Therefore, the problem addressed was one of a works-based faith rather than a lifestyle rooted in God's continuous grace. The intervention implementation demonstrated a problem not of belief but of practice. Participants agreed with the truthfulness of the GBDA claims but sometimes lacked action on those truths. This project was concerned with why actions did not always follow belief claims. In part, participants demonstrated a lifestyle not always congruent with their beliefs. Faith was not problematic at an agreement level but in a participatory lifestyle.

The thesis was that if an educational ministry that equips and enriches the Christian lifestyle in God's grace is implemented and leads to gospel-based living, then the spiritual lifestyle of SRCC will flourish. Several themes arose from this project, including, but not limited to, revisiting SRCC's ministry philosophy, living with the presence of God daily, addressing fear, addressing the source(s) of human identity, checking spiritual motivation, and identifying that which works against the disciple's lifestyle.

Research Implications

It has been said that “teaching can sometimes be mechanical, with less than the desired outcome.”¹ Since this project sought to develop an adult ministry to educate, equip, and enrich the Christian lifestyle in the transformative presence of God, ministry beyond education was required. The mechanics of the class gave way to an interactive experience of the material. Presentation of the GBDA content coincided with robust discussion and demonstrated with a reflective activity. An unintended implication was that this addressed more than one type of learning skill with each meeting and enhanced the ministry experience.

¹ Benjamin Mulparthi, “Culturally Induced Male Dominance: Addressing breakdown of Harmony in Asian Indian Christian Marriages.” DMin Thesis, Liberty University School of Divinity, 2023.

Much of this project required self-examination. This can be hard because it implies honesty and vulnerability. The researcher approached the presentation material with care and consideration of these implications. However, this care was also considered in terms of the truth of the Bible. The researcher assumed the participant could not only handle the endeavor but also could grow and thrive in the exercise. As Hamilton directs, "Do not discount the capacities of God's people...Show them literary artistry. Show them the subtle power of carefully constructed narratives. Show them the force of truth in arguments that unfold with inexorable logic. If they are genuine believers, they will want to understand."² Discipleship deals with the truth of God as depicted in the Bible, and it works to shape individuals around that truth rather than bend the truth around the participants.

From the beginning, the researcher was not concerned with adding any new programs to the extensive list of ministry offerings already provided by SRCC. Instead, biblical identity was the concern for both the individuals and the believing community of SRCC. This project was intended to provide a fresh approach to discipling its members. This implies that all adult ministries be revisited and re-evaluated. If grace is the foundational structure of discipleship, then all ministries should be rooted in God's transformative power. Some ministries may need to end at SRCC because they do not comply with this foundation, while others may need to be revisited and restructured.

While the scope of this action research was limited to adults 18 and older and past high school, it would be beneficial to SRCC to evaluate other ministries considering a grace-based approach. If this is done, not only would unification happen within different age groups and

² James M. Hamilton, "Biblical Theology and Preaching," in *Text Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned L. Mathews (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2010), 139 – 140.

ministries, but expectations of SRCC's mission would be clear. The people of SRCC would have clarity of mission while having a systematic approach to a godly lifestyle.

Research Applications

While the quantitative survey did show gaps between the belief answers and the action answers, the qualitative research provided positive results in a grace-based approach to discipleship. A detailed study and theology of grace is a significant project beyond the scope of this action research, but Stephen Cherry taps into this while promoting “relational discipleship” that finds its origins first in a relationship between the disciple and Jesus (and all that it entails), then in relationships with other disciples. He argues, “the word ‘kindness’ is one [word] that deserves to be given greater prominence in the discussion and practice of Christian discipleship.”³ GBDA takes this idea further than kindness and expands this understanding to the grace of God revealed in His presence.

At the heart of GBDA is the question: What would the life of a disciple look like if God was already present with them? The participation group grappled with this question each week, demonstrating this truth as the primary motivating factor to practice the identity marks of a disciple. This significant growth addressed the problem of a works-based faith that members are prone to wander toward. One focus group member identified a positive experience in GBDA by calling it "upside-down" living. She articulated how she focused on what she is "supposed to be doing as a believer" rather than on who she is in Christ. This was considered as evidence of spiritual growth and reflective of the efforts of GBDA.

³ Stephen Cherry, “Relational Discipleship: Putting Kindness First,” in *The Meanings of Discipleship: Being Disciples Then and Now*, ed. Andrew Hayes and Stephen Cherry (London: SCM Press, 2021), 125.

More applications were considered in the post-PG informal interview with the Advisory Board. One Advisory Board member suggested GBDA as the mechanism for all SRCC's ministries. He views GBDA with a lot of potential. "I can see this in a variety of ministry settings," he stated. He went on to explain envisioning a three-fold launch in the form of a training curriculum for all staff and elders, then training for current small group leaders, and providing training for future small group and classroom leaders. Next, the Advisory Board suggested a sermon series to be presented to the entire congregation. Small group material is to be written to coincide with a GBDA sermon series. The Advisory Board considered GBDA as a "unified ground of conduct" through which all SRCC's ministries could operate.

Another Advisory Board member envisions GBDA as a "grassroots" ministry. By this, he means that a grace-based approach should start at the most basic relational level of the church, "starting small and given life to grow," as not just part of the fabric of SRCC but as its identity. One way this was discussed was potentially pairing individuals with a "grace coach" who would meet regularly for several weeks "coaching" the individuals, or couples with couples, in the identity marks rooted in the transformative presence of God. Then, when "the time is right," those individuals who have been mentored in grace become the grace coach for another.

Susan Mettes identified a significant gap in ministry settings while reporting her research concerns about how insecurity plays a functional role in loneliness and isolation. She states:

I don't know where the line falls between the spiritual and the cognitive... We are to pay attention to how well we are setting ourselves up for future temptation (and future glory)... We are to fight distortions. None of this is primarily about therapy; it's about spiritual growth. I believe insecurity always has a spiritual aspect to it – and that security has a spiritual source: our security in Christ. We can train our thoughts so that our often-false sense of rejection doesn't metastasize and kill our relationships.⁴

⁴ Mettes, *The Loneliness Epidemic*, 78 – 79.

This action research meets this gap by re-orienting discipleship efforts and the life of the disciple on God's grace. His presence is the catalytic element that provides security, love, worth, acceptance, and purpose in the life of the believer. If GBDA is in place, the life of the Christian person will flourish because the person will not "train [their] thoughts" on that which kills relationships and "metastasize" their walk as a disciple. Instead, God's grace represents acceptance against a "false sense of rejection," whether it is experienced in a smaller setting or the corporate church community. Mettes correctly identifies this problem as a spiritual growth conundrum primarily. GBDA provides the spiritual solution to address this problem.

In every level of SRCC's adult educational ministries, grace must be revisited. The default teaching is applied to believing. James, the brother of Jesus, reminds his readers of the dangers of working toward belief rather than from it in James 2:14 and 19 when he says, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?...You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder!" (ESV). James Wilhoit reminds pastors of this truth:

We need to show trust by living according to the gospel. We can create a community where unity and love is a witness to the world. *Grace is also a verb: grace brings change. Grace is God's sustaining and transforming power.* The grace of God that has reconciled us and saved us is not just God's kindness, but also his marvelous power that is able to remake us and sustain us as new people.⁵

The educational and discipleship ministries of SRCC need re-evaluation, but not deconstruction. SRCC needs to revisit the extensive menu of ministry opportunities and decide if those ministries fit the unified purpose of a disciple-making church. The researcher is encouraged that GBDA is

⁵ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 158. Emphasis is mine.

considered as a basis for operating spiritual formation ministries that bring renewed purpose and clarity to the mission beyond belief and into action.

Research Limitations

This action research set out to address a contemporary legalistic problem among the adults of South Rock Christian Church. The research identified gaps between what the adults who are already participating in small groups and classes of SRCC believe and how they put those values into practice. The problem was not in professed Christian belief but in a lifestyle rooted in the transformative presence of God. Members of the Participation Group identified the problem as "upside-down" living. Rather than addressing the works of the believers, GBDA sought to get at the source, which is an activity in the grace of God, instead of the efforts of the disciple.

Certain limitations were put on and experienced by this research. The project was limited in scope to adults who are eighteen or older and are no longer students in the elementary or youth programs of SRCC. The researcher's ministry aligns with this age group, as well. There is no way of knowing the efficacy of GBDA within elementary or youth programming without conducting separate action research projects. However, results from the Advisory Board consultations suggest that GBDA be considered as the ministry's philosophical basis for SRCC at large. This means that GBDA needs to be considered at all levels of ministry at SRCC.

The focus of this project was solely on the discipleship efforts of SRCC and was not intended to comment on ministries other than at South Rock Christian Church. However, the grace of God, as defined by this project, is understood to be a holistic truth, and many theological and ecclesiological principles apply to other church ministry settings. There are a variety of

discipleship models that provide structure and validity to discipleship efforts. GBDA seeks to be a major voice amongst them.

While GBDA sought to strengthen and unify the partnership of evangelical and discipleship efforts, it was primarily focused on the teaching aspect of SRCC's discipleship ministries. Dodson comments on this dichotomy: "When we separate evangelism from discipleship, we imply that 'sharing the gospel' is something we do only with non-Christians. This implies that the gospel has the power to save but not to sanctify."⁶ The researcher recognizes that the gap between evangelism and discipleship is significantly less than what is usually assumed. Relegating evangelism to preaching and outreach activity and discipleship to education provides a disservice to both efforts and is unbiblical in most cases (Matt 28:19 – 20). Nonetheless, this project was focused primarily on the educational ministry of SRCC and sought to provide an experiential teaching structure for encountering God's grace.

The experiential part of the project lasted six weeks. This was a self-imposed limit placed on the project by the researcher to accomplish the goal of the project in a timely manner. However, God's grace is a broad and exciting topic that cannot be fully explored in that time limit. Therefore, GBDA efforts moving forward must assume this. One Focus Group member commented that there "wasn't enough time to ask about issues of God being present." He said, "I wish there were a way we could have spent more weeks on each mark." Future GBDA development would do well to keep this in mind and focus on the truth that it teaches rather than the timeline of the project.

While the project was limited in scope at an educational level, it did seek to address the participatory faith of the disciple at SRCC. Participatory faith goes beyond church attendance to

⁶ Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, 22.

the active relationship of the disciple to Jesus Christ. This means that the participatory faith that GBDA sought to teach was not necessarily relegated to church volunteerism but addressed the lifestyle of the participant. GBDA expanded the limits of its educational force to enrich and equip the participants for life outside the classroom and teaching experience. Further research and observation would need to be considered to know whether that was accomplished, but GBDA provides the framework for continuous ministry in that direction.

This action research broached a topic that is as wide as it can be in depth. In many ways, choosing a discipleship structure is a daunting task. GBDA, however, did show how freedom can be experienced both by the disciple who centers their life on the ever-present gospel of Jesus and for the church by providing clarity in function and direction in accomplishing the mission to "help people find and follow Jesus."

Further Research

The problem that this project addressed was contemporary legalism in the lifestyle of the disciples of South Rock Christian Church. The adult ministry contains participants who struggle to live a lifestyle based on God's grace. To address this problem, the purpose of this action research was to implement a ministry structure that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian life based on God's grace. The project provided a framework to help participants engage and participate holistically in God's grace with the goal of continued transformation toward godliness. That structure included education to be able to identify the lies that the participants were living. Then, the project helped its members learn biblical truth to replace these lies. Enrichment in spiritual formation and development was built from that foundation.

The action research examined the discipleship ministry of SRCC. Because discipleship is such a vast topic, several issues require further research. This project touched on a few but did

not engage them with the full thrust of research because they did not fit within the scope of the project. These issues include the efficacy of the current small group discipleship ministry, how the pulpit ministry and discipleship ministry work together, discipleship across all age groups, how SRCC measures discipleship, and special issues that arise in the discipling efforts of the church.

Since the problem of a works-based lifestyle exists in the lives of those already participating in SRCC's discipleship ministries, it would be worthwhile to re-evaluate the efficacy of the current discipleship set-up. As it stands, SRCC values small groups and education in connection with discipleship. However, there is no stated purpose to its small group ministry. Nowhere is there a stated plan for groups, nor is there anything that links the discipling efforts to the primary services that include worship and preaching. In the initial informal interview with the Advisory Board, it was stated that joining a small group was assumed as an expectation, but no one was able to demonstrate how that assumption is received by the congregation.

The small group ministry should be researched further and tested as to whether it helps SRCC accomplish its goal of helping people find and follow Jesus. Small groups are the primary place that adults connect outside of the main services, but there is no real evaluative process in place to know if they are working with the church's mission. Continued research is required to gather that data and evaluate the effectiveness of this program.

The preaching ministry is the primary corporate exposure to the Word of God. The lead minister is the primary preacher, but the pulpit is also filled throughout the year by other staff members. However, what is preached on the weekend is often a different topic than what is experienced in study or small groups. That is not always a negative experience, as groups are in a unique position to address topics and issues that are specific to the members who make them up.

Further research would be required to test whether it is worthwhile for SRCC to line up its educational and preaching ministries. Furthermore, the church has seen some positive outcomes in unifying the children's ministry curriculum with the pulpit material, as families are then exposed to the same curriculum at age-appropriate levels. Research would be required to know whether a supplemental curriculum for the small group experience would enhance the effectiveness of the ministry both in spiritual and numerical growth.

As previous sections have noted, the scope of this project was limited to adults who are already connected to the discipleship ministries of SRCC. It would be worth researching GBDA for children's and youth ministries. The Advisory Board has suggested that GBDA be brought in as the central philosophical approach of the church. If this becomes the case, research would be required to learn the best way to apply GBDA to all ministries of the church. Furthermore, an evaluation of current isolated structures is needed. Some ministries from the extensive list of SRCC offerings might need to be let go, while others might need to be restructured to line up with the church's proposed philosophy. This was, indeed, outside the scope of both the action research and the ministry of the researcher. However, it could increase levels of accountability within the church's ministry, as well as provide clarity for church members' expectations.

The church currently measures church attendance, offerings, and baptisms. Small group connections are supplemental but not made public to the rest of the church in the same way attendance, offerings, and baptisms are. In both meetings with the Advisory Board, discipleship measurement was a topic of discussion. One member initially declared that it is impossible to measure discipleship. However, making disciples is the recognized mission of the church. How does SRCC know when they have been successful in this mission?

Many works are dedicated to discipleship efficacy, but most revolve around the number of participants and not about measuring spiritual growth. William Hoyt suggests that if the church were to count only one statistic, it should count conversions.⁷ This certainly tells how successful evangelistic and outreach efforts are, but what about spiritual growth? Willard and Schreiner suggest combining worship attendance, giving, serving, and participation in adult groups as ways of measuring the effectiveness of discipleship ministries.⁸ Once again, this works to measure how many are participating and not how those that do participate are growing.

Discipleship is difficult to measure as many elements must be considered. Essentially, measuring discipleship is evaluating Christian maturity. Paul reminds the Ephesians that the work of the ministry is to "equip the saints" and to "grow up every way into Him" (Eph 4:13 – 16, ESV). If the church is taking on this work, then proper evaluation of the ministry is warranted. Gordon Smith posits similar questions. "What would it look like for a congregation to be a venue for transformation," he asks, "where the underlying assumption of congregational life is that through conversion one is initiated into a life of fellowship with a people of God and that together they are on a journey of formation, indeed transformation into the image of Christ?"⁹ While not offering a measuring tool, he does qualify maturity as both personal and congregational responsibility that is identified with wisdom, good works, love for others, and joy.¹⁰

⁷ William R. Hoyt, *Effectiveness by the Numbers: Counting What Counts in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 9.

⁸ Ken Willard and Mike Schreiner, *Stride: Creating a Discipleship Pathway for Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 75 – 77.

⁹ Gordon T. Smith, *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 181 – 182.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 185 – 186.

Still, there seems to be a lack of spiritual growth and discipleship measurement mechanisms outside of attendance in church, adult groups, and service opportunities. Further and contemporary research in spiritual development would be beneficial for SRCC and the universal church at large. Identifying how growth is happening outside of numeric measurements is critical and should be eminent as the next stage of research for SRCC discipleship.

Another area of research that was not included in this action research was special issues to consider in discipleship. Throughout the Participation Group experience, members would often refer to previous church experiences. Two people mentioned unhealthy experiences in the church from their respective pasts. This affected their ability to engage in a small group setting and required special attention. Although it does not change the truthfulness nor the need for a grace-based lifestyle, these issues are worth researching to determine their impact on discipling ministries. Indeed, these issues may mean that a grace-based approach is needed even more and more urgently.

South Rock offers ministries that help with counseling, grief, and divorce care. SRCC would benefit from further research in these areas and how they impact the church's discipleship ministry. Grace certainly covers the brokenness that comes from these special issues, but greater care in applying GBDA needs to be considered, and training in these areas would need to address it.

Conclusion

The Grace-based Discipleship Approach addressed the issue of the contemporary legalistic lifestyle of the adult disciples in South Rock Christian Church. Quantitative data demonstrated a gap between believing in biblical truth and practicing it. Whether it was from a decision not to practice or thinking they could not do it, the basis for that gap rested in human

effort. GBDA revisited the foundational truth that God's grace is on display in the life of the disciple in the form of His transformative presence. It is His power and strength that enables the disciple to live according to the identifying marks of a follower of Christ. GBDA offers not just a reminder of God's grace but teaches His grace as the vehicle that sustains the believer. Actions flow from that belief.

Based on the experience of this action research, SRCC would flourish in its discipleship ministries if they would adopt a grace-based approach. This approach would provide a unified working ground rooted in God's Word, prayer, honesty, and outreach. If GBDA is adopted as the working ministry philosophy, then a metric is in place to gauge the effectiveness of all ministries, and expectations for the members of SRCC would be clear. Ultimately, God would be sought out and considered in all activity, thereby receiving all glory.

APPENDIX A

LEADERSHIP PERMISSION REQUEST LETTER

February 24, 2023

Andy Jones
Lead Minister
South Rock Christian Church
900 S. Rock Rd
Derby, KS 67037

Dear Andy,

As a doctoral student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity pursuing a Doctor of Ministry in Theology and Apologetics at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand the discipleship structure of SRCC. The title of my research project is The Problem of Works-Based Faith of Adults in South Rock Christian Church and the purpose of my research is implement a ministry structure that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian life based on God's grace.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in/at South Rock Christian Church and to contact leadership and members to invite them to participate in my research study. Furthermore, I am requesting permission to access church data.

Participants will be asked to complete the attached survey/contact me to schedule an interview/etc. Remove the following information if you are only requesting access to records: Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead.

APPENDIX B
SURVEY REQUEST EMAIL

Dear Potential Participant

As a doctoral candidate in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research pertaining to discipleship ministry focused on God's grace as part of the Doctorate of Ministry in Theology and Apologetics degree. The purpose of my research is to study, evaluate, and implement a ministry structure that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian life based on God's grace, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, members of SRCC, and part of a small group or class at SRCC. Participants will be asked to take a survey which they can either email or bring in physically. They will potentially be asked to join a six-week participation group. It should take approximately 15-25 minutes to complete the procedure listed. [Retain the applicable sentence.] Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please complete the attached survey and return it by email or handing it to Nick Pannone at [REDACTED]

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to [me at the time of the survey].

Participants will be entered in a raffle to receive a gift card.

Sincerely,

Nick Pannone
Teaching Minister
South Rock Christian Church
[REDACTED]

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPATION GROUP SURVEY

The following assessment is designed to help evaluate the implementation of the four marks of the disciple of Jesus. Those four marks are Interaction with God's Word, Prayer, Confession, and Service/Ministry. This assessment is for those who have a faith in Jesus Christ and would consider themselves active church participants.

Please answer the following questions:

1. How long have you attended your current church? _____
2. How long have you considered yourself a Christian? _____
3. How often do you attend a church or church-related service? _____
4. Age: _____
5. Gender: _____
6. I am willing to be a member of a participation group that will meet for six weeks on Sunday nights starting in July 16 from 6:30 – 7:30 PM at South Rock Christian Church: Y or N

Interaction with God's Word	Always	Almost Always	Occasionally	Not Very Often	Not at All
	5	4	3	2	1
I read or listen to the Bible being read daily as a part of my normal routine.					
I participate in a weekly Bible study activity with other Christians or people of the church					
I attend a church that teaches and/or promotes the teaching of the Bible weekly					
Every day I think of ways to apply what I learn from the Bible to my everyday life					
I find that God's Word and its teachings habitually influence important decisions in my life					
I regularly meditate regularly on how to apply what I find in God's Word on my own					
I take time to research what I don't understand in the Bible					
In my small group/class, I regularly ask questions and participate in discussions concerning what we learn in the Bible					
I prioritize time in the Word of God even if I am busy					
My group/class informs what I read in the Bible on my own					
Add up each column and provide total:					

Prayer	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	5	4	3	2	1
Engaging God in personal prayer throughout my day is important to me as a Christian					
Prayer is a staple part of attending a church service					
Value has been added to my life by participating in a study group, small group, class, or Bible study activity that regularly prays for one another					
The primary purpose of private and corporate prayer is to gain a sense of relief, protection, and/or peace					
The prayers I say alone are as meaningful or more meaningful as those that are said in a church service					
I regularly pray for people who do not know Christ					
Prayer is always present in my group/class					
Journaling is an important part of my personal prayer experience					
Through prayer I feel connected to a larger community of believers					
Prayer is the primary way I worship					
Add up each column and provide total:					

Confession	Always	Almost Always	Occasionally	Not Very Often	Not at All
	5	4	3	2	1
It is important to me to have other Christians in my life to share doubts, sins, and failures with					
I have a daily time in my life when I am able to confess sin, doubts, and failures to God through prayer					
I attend a church that values relational depth					
It is important for me to confess doubt, sin, and failure to God					
I attend a church that promotes honesty, truth, and transparency					
Transparency with other like-minded believers is essential					
I regularly seek to resolve hurts and offenses toward other believers					
I am not holding any grudges toward any person					
My small group/class is the primary place for public confession of sin, doubt, and failure					
I consider it an honor to hear someone else confess doubt, sin, and failure					
Add up each column and provide total:					

Service/Evangelism	Always	Almost Always	Occasionally	Not Very Often	Not at All
	5	4	3	2	1
I actively serve in the church I attend					
I am able to articulate what I believe and why I believe it					
I believe the gospel can help those who are lost					
Serving is an important part of my witness					
I believe that my individual service is an important part of edifying and building up the church					
I seek out opportunities for my church/group/class to serve our greater community					
When the church provides service opportunities, I always try to participate					
It is important that I intentionally engage with non-believers in conversation regarding the Christian faith					
I share my testimony in a group/class setting					
It is important to extend love and forgiveness to others, particularly those I consider enemies					
Add up each column and provide total:					

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPATION GROUP CONSENT

Consent

Title of the Project: Grace-Based Discipleship Approach

Principal Investigator: Nick Pannone, Doctoral Candidate in John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a member of a small group or class at South Rock Christian Church Derby, KS. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to research and implement a ministry structure that educates, equips, and enriches the Christian life based on God's grace.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an in-person Participation Group video-recorded. Group meetings will last approximately one hour for six weeks.
2. Participants will attend an initial informational meeting in Week 1 that will last 30-60 minutes.
3. Participants may be asked to participate in a Focus Group that will participate in a short-answer questionnaire prior to Week 2 and after Week 6.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study include spiritual growth in their Christian faith, camaraderie with other group members, a deepened understanding of Scripture, an enhanced prayer experience, and potential service opportunities.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. The risks involved in this study include personal reflection in homework assignments, potential personal engagement with other group members, and potential to reveal personal information in a short-answer format. To reduce risk, I will monitor participants, discontinue the interview if needed, and provide referral information for counseling services. You may skip any written or verbal questions that you are not comfortable with.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be anonymous/will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.]
- [Describe how and where data will be stored and how the data will be disposed of. If you will have both electronic and hardcopy data, include information associated with both.] Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked drawer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and/or all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years/until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted/erased. The researcher/the researcher and members of [his/her] doctoral committee/the study team/etc. will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

To participate in the research, you will need to pay for transportation to and from group meetings.

Is the researcher in a position of authority over participants, or does the researcher have a financial conflict of interest?

The researcher serves as Teaching Pastor at South Rock Christian Church. To limit potential or perceived conflicts, data collection will be anonymous, so the researcher will not know who participated. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or South Rock Christian Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Nick Pannone. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Robert Lytle, [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered

and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Legally Authorized Representative Permission

By signing this document, you are agreeing to the person named below participating in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I agree for the person named below to take part in this study.

APPENDIX E
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE
Grace-Based Faith Questionnaire

1. When I think about God I feel _____
2. When I have to trust God I feel _____
3. When I think about God I wish _____
4. Sometimes I get angry with God when _____
5. It frustrates me when God wants me to _____
6. The one thing I would change about myself to please God is _____
7. When I think about God's commands I feel _____
8. Sometimes I wish God would _____
9. I can really depend on God when _____
10. In my relationship with God I am always sure that He will _____
11. The one thing that frightens me about God is _____
12. God surprises me when _____
13. The one thing I am afraid God will do is _____
14. I really enjoy God when _____
15. God really enjoys me when _____

APPENDIX G

LEAD MINISTER PERMISSION LETTER



SOUTHROCKCHRISTIANCHURCH

To whom it may concern,

My name is Andy Jones, and I am the Lead Minister at South Rock Christian Church. Nick Pannone has requested permission to conduct research for a project within our church body in association with his doctoral project.

I am granting permission to reach out to leadership and members within the church to continue in the process of moving forward with the study/project.

Respectfully,

A solid black rectangular box redacting the signature of Andy Jones.

Andy Jones

APPENDIX H

MCKNIGHT IMAGES OF JESUS QUESTIONNAIRE

Part 1: What Do You Think of Jesus?

Answer each question with a “yes” (Y) or “no” (N). Work quickly and do not think too long about the exact meaning of the questions. Your answers in this part are for what *you* think about Jesus.

1.	Does his mood often go up and down?	Y	N
2.	Is he a talkative person?	Y	N
3.	Would being in debt worry him?	Y	N
4.	Is he rather lively?	Y	N
5.	Was he ever greedy by helping himself to more than his share of anything?	Y	N
6.	Would he take drugs that may have strange or dangerous effects?	Y	N
7.	Has he ever blamed someone for doing something he knew was really his fault?	Y	N
8.	Does he prefer to go his own way rather than act by the rules?	Y	N
9.	Does he often feel “fed up”?	Y	N
10.	Has he ever taken anything (even as minute as a pin or a button) that belonged to someone else?	Y	N
11.	Would he call himself a nervous person?	Y	N
12.	Does he think marriage is old-fashioned and should be done away with?	Y	N
13.	Can he easily get some life into a rather dull party?	Y	N
14.	Is he a worrier?	Y	N
15.	Does he tend to keep in the background on social occasions?	Y	N
16.	Does it worry him if he knows there are mistakes in his work?	Y	N
17.	Has he ever cheated at a game?	Y	N
18.	Does he suffer from “nerves”?	Y	N
19.	Has he ever taken advantage of someone?	Y	N
20.	Is he mostly quiet when he is with other people?	Y	N
21.	Does he often feel lonely?	Y	N
22.	Does he think it is better to follow society’s rules than go his own way?	Y	N
23.	Do other people think of him as being very lively?	Y	N
24.	Does he always practice what he preaches?	Y	N

Part 2: Who Are You?

Answer each question with a “yes” (Y) or “no” (N). Work quickly and do not think too long about the exact meaning of the questions. Your answers in this part are for what *you* think about you.

1.	Have you ever taken anything (even as minute as a pin or a button) that belonged to someone else?	Y	N
2.	Do you often feel “fed up”?	Y	N
3.	Do you prefer to go your own way rather than act by the rules?	Y	N
4.	Have you ever blamed someone for doing something he knew was really his fault?	Y	N
5.	Would you take drugs that may have strange or dangerous effects?	Y	N
6.	Were you ever greedy by helping yourself to more than your share of anything?	Y	N
7.	Are you rather lively?	Y	N
8.	Would being in debt worry you?	Y	N
9.	Are you a talkative person?	Y	N
10.	Does your mood often go up and down?	Y	N
11.	Are you mostly quiet when you are with other people?	Y	N
12.	Have you ever taken advantage of someone?	Y	N
13.	Do you suffer from “nerves”?	Y	N
14.	Have you ever cheated at a game?	Y	N
15.	Does it worry you if he knows there are mistakes in his work?	Y	N
16.	Do you tend to keep in the background on social occasions?	Y	N
17.	Are you a worrier?	Y	N
18.	Can you easily put some life into a rather dull party?	Y	N
19.	Do you think marriage is old-fashioned and should be done away with?	Y	N
20.	Are you mostly quiet when you are with other people?	Y	N
21.	Do you always practice what you preach?	Y	N
22.	Do other people think of you as being very lively?	Y	N
23.	Do you think it is better to follow society’s rules than go your own way?	Y	N
24.	Do you often feel lonely?	Y	N

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IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Dear Nick Pannone and Robert Lytle,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds that your study does not meet the definition of human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your project is not considered human subjects research because it will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application. Any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. **If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word research with the word project throughout both documents.**

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office