AN INVESTIGATION OF ADVERSITY IN CHRISTIAN LIVING AND PROPOSAL
FOR DISCIPLESHIP RESPONSE

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DEDICATION

To: The four treasures of my life: Jen, Jackson, Maryn, and Faith.

I pray that through the adversities you face in life, God would make you “complete and lacking nothing.” I know that, “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.” I am so grateful that God has allowed me to journey through life with each of you. I love you always, and thank you!
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ABSTRACT

With numerous ministries teaching a cultural gospel comprised of prosperity and pleasure, people have the impression that a saving faith limits personal hardships. Jesus taught his disciples the truth about hardship and how to struggle well and the Church is called to do likewise. This thesis will present five key biblical truths to equip Christians for growing their faith through personal struggle. Moreover, the project will give leaders a guide for discipling hurting church members. The author will research current and historical discipleship materials and models, examine current teachings on faith and struggle, explore relevant biblical teachings, and survey fifty local church leaders to gauge how their faith has grown through adversity, and the discipleship methods they employ to help others to do the same. This thesis will investigate the role of adversity in Christian living and present a proposal for a discipleship response.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is a consistent increase in the amount of hardships and pain people are encountering today. The complexity of these struggles is also increasing. These struggles are apparent in the faces seen every day, and also in the numbers read about on a regular basis. Samplings of numbers like the national divorce rate, individual bankruptcy filings and national debt, and number of single parent homes. The United States is experiencing a level of pain and difficulty that is regularly palpable. Moreover, as the amount of pain and difficulty increases all around, the tolerance for pain and struggle is decreasing. Society, does not accept life struggles and trials as normative. A fast-food chain summarized the culture’s current state of being in their latest company slogan: “Have it your way!” Most people believe they can have life their way, on their terms and executed with their plans. For many, those ambitious life plans never prepare them for how to handle the inevitable struggles of this world. This is a time and place that demands immediate pleasure, and dismisses any notion of benefit to struggle. As Dr. Paul Brand states in the last chapter of his work, The Gift of Pain, “It is because the meaning of life in the United States is the pursuit of pleasure and personal freedom that suffering is so traumatic for Americans.”

Not only is this a hurting society, it is also a doubtful society. According to a study by the Barna Group,

“During 2013 alone, citizens lamented the failure of their leaders and institutions. From the government shutdown to Pope Francis’s public callout of the Vatican bank to the whistle blowing of the NSA to the problematic rollout of Obamcare,

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1 Phillip Yancey and Paul Brand, The Gift of Pain: Why We Hurt and What We Can Do About It (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 12.
Americans were reminded again and again that institutions apparently have a habit of breaking promises. The Associated Press even went so far as to call 2013 “The Year of Dysfunction, Discord and Distrust.”

People are experiencing a great deal mistrust and scepticism towards other people and institutions.

Many people will admit their interest in hearing more about Jesus, but will strongly deny any interest in the institution of the Church of Jesus Christ. Like most individuals experiencing pain and struggle, the culture is also experiencing doubts about who or what they place their hopes in. Barna continues in his study by saying,

“When it comes to the value of a local church, Americans are now essentially lumped into three groups: those who say it is necessary to attend church, those who say it is not, and those who are on the fence about the value of local church participation. What’s surprising is that these three groups roughly divide the country’s adult population in thirds, leading to a tremendous tug-of-war between pro-church and naysayers.”

Americans are openly debating, with their voices and attendance, if the Church has anything to say to their doubts and fears.

Churches must provide a clear and compelling answer as to why Christ makes all the difference in struggling well through the tribulations of life. This dysfunction, discord, and distrust creates an enormous burden for the Church and its leadership to overcome in ministering to our culture and most congregations. How does the Church respond to a culture, so disappointed with life and also largely distrusting of institutions? In fact, it is the struggling and doubtful who needs pastoring and discipleship the most. Jesus said, “Those who are well have no

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3 Ibid.
need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

The world needs the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; the Church is tasked with delivering it in a relevant and compassionate manner. The purpose and mission of the Church is to make disciples of all people; it is designed to help struggling people. Jesus made certain His disciples were well prepared to deal with and grow from their own struggles, and deal with the hardships of others. Jesus said, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” Jesus is speaking to his disciples about a time when He will no longer comfort them in physical form, as they have been accustomed. Jesus is attempting to prepare his disciples for what they will face in a world with ever-increasing evil and tribulation. Not only is He preparing them for the tribulations of the world, He is also preparing them for their own doubts. Jesus is teaching the Church to face trials and tribulations from the world, and doubts and fears from within themselves. Speaking to the importance of the task of discipling through crisis, Pastor Tim Keller once said, “I came to realize that at the heart of why people disbelieve and believe in God, of why people decline and grow in character, of how God becomes less real and more real to us—is suffering.”

The leadership of local churches has a tremendous responsibility and opportunity today. In churches all across the country, a staff member or team is spending hours trying to strategize a plan to help a hurting congregant. The author recalls one such meeting of church staff leaders, gathered together to talk about a person in the church who was facing a tremendous crisis. At one point, the senior pastor, who had become perplexed and agitated loudly proclaimed, “There is nothing more that we can do for this person. I do not understand what is wrong with their life, we

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4 Mark 2:17. Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).
5 John 16:33 (ESV).
just need to refer them to a counselor outside of our church.” The room fell silent as the church staff realized they had no answers, no principles or plan to engage this struggling person with. Church leadership is more comfortable discussing programs and expansion models than hurting people. In fact, George Barna reports that, “Believers are largely indistinguishable from non-believers in how they think and live. The Church has lost its place at the table of cultural influence, can we restore the impact of the Church through more events and buildings?”7

The author’s various church experiences suggest that many church leadership teams have a difficult time talking about and engaging personal adversity. It is ironic that in a world that has an ever-increasing amount of pain, the Church has an ever-increasing intolerance for pain. Moreover, many local church staffs do not anticipate how to disciple a person who is in pain; they are not properly equipped with biblical principles or a discipleship plan. As G.K. Chesterton stated, “Once people stop believing in God, the problem is not that they will believe nothing; rather the problem is that they will believe anything.”8 The Church must find its voice in this problem of pain, and call people once again to the message of the cross. As Henri Fredric plainly stated about this problem, “You desire to know the art of living, my friend? It is contained in one phrase: Make use of suffering.”9

The Church must regain a biblical understanding about adversity and suffering in the world, and more importantly, about what God calls us to do when faced with it. Personal faith can greatly grow and benefit through our struggles. In the Scriptures, it is significant how often the concept of growing one’s faith and personal adversity appear together. The Church can have

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9 Keller, *Walking with God*, 64.
little tolerance for dealing with people in pain, and yet it is through tribulations of various kinds that God does His most important work in and through people. The author’s pastoral experiences and the existing data would suggest both the secularist and the prosperity messages have influenced the majority of people sitting in church pews. Moreover, many church leaders have been influenced in the same manner by these philosophies.

The messages of secularism and prosperity are constantly on display for God’s people to see. Secularism and prosperity teachings comprise what is also referred to as the cultural gospel. As a pastor, the author has experienced first-hand the battle that rages for the head, hearts, and hands of the people of God. In conversations after worship services, telephone calls for help, and prayer time after preaching, the author has witnessed the effects of false truth in regards to struggle. People inside and outside the Church are under a constant attack from, “the father of lies”\(^\text{10}\), as Jesus refers to him. These mirages of solace and peace call out to the people of God to come unto them, and not unto Jesus.

The project will give local church leaders the key biblical principles and a holistic discipleship guide that grows people through their daily adversity. Based on the biblical principles, an overview of current discipleship models within the Church, a review of historical understandings of struggle and growth, various books and articles, personal experiences, and surveys of churches and ministry leaders, this project will give principles to be learned and practiced within the local Church. The principles of this project will show how Churches can engage their culture with a discipleship process that acknowledges the tribulations of this world and answers with the truth of God’s word and presence. Five key principles will be shared from the Scriptures about growing your faith through personal adversity. These biblical principles for

\(^{10}\) John 8:44 (ESV).
Discipleship will be gathered from various stories and passages throughout the Scriptures. This project will specifically address church staff members and leadership teams with a guide for how to best disciple their hurting congregations. Discipleship in the Church can include giving pastoral care, small groups, Sunday school and classroom settings, preaching and teaching ministry, and individual coaching and mentoring. The growth principles shared will also include a discipleship delivery model for leaders to use in their local church context, and suggested resources that will complement the discipleship model.

The most important task of the Church is to disciple its flock. The Church is called to make disciples. Discipleship, at its core, is about taking the truth of God’s word and applying it appropriately to the reality of one’s life. The reality of life for all of us, in various seasons and forms, is struggle. Jesus prepared his disciples for discipleship through struggle, the apostles preached and wrote extensively about it, now we as modern day Church leaders must justly do so. The Church must understand and develop discipleship strategies and models that adhere to the truth of the Scriptures and connect to the difficult realities of this world. In doing so, the Church will guard itself against the false philosophy and coping strategies of the social gospel message. Society is counting upon local church leaders to get this right. Bill Hybels once famously wrote, “The local Church is the hope of the world.” He is right, and church leaders must begin to believe and behave like it.

The author of this thesis has pastored for fifteen years in the local church. Those churches have included a mega-church and a church plant. The author has also worked with and consulted with various congregations through the leadership network, seminaries, and other academic pursuits. In the past fifteen years, the author has led through seasons of great personal

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and church growth and also through seasons of regression and turmoil. The author has personally overseen and observed many types of discipleship models. Many of these models were somewhat effective in their endeavors; however, many were lacking in their ability to truly create a lifestyle of Christ-followership. George Barna and his team define discipleship as, “becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ.” Barna writes about intentional training that must occur between a church leader (discipler) and a disciple. This thesis project encompasses the biblical principles and plans to help leaders produce disciples, in the context of a hurting world.

Statement of the Problem

Many churches are losing the battle to influence and disciple their people. The Church is losing this discipleship battle, in part, due to the cultural gospel message that has infiltrated local churches and leadership tables. Many people are attempting to escape their pain and struggle, rather than face it with the hope they can have through Christ. Local churches should be the primary influence to guide people through their adversity. Many local church leaders have been silent through their flock’s suffering. Many churches feel as if they do not have a message that compares to the cultural gospel message of positivity and wellness through faith. The Church must regain its voice by rediscovering and applying the voice of Christ and the Scriptures about the trials of this world and the maturing of their faith through them.

This thesis will collect and investigate information from a variety of sources, both current and historical, Christian and secular. Surveys will be conducted on current ministry leaders serving within the local church a variety of local churches. By definition, this thesis project will identify a Church leader as someone who is currently discipling a group of people. This group of

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12 George Barna, Growing True Disciples, 20.
leaders will include full-time and part-time staff members, community group leaders, elders and deacons, and high-capacity volunteers who are discipling groups of people within the local church. Discipleship will be defined as the practices and principles that help willing participants to follow Jesus Christ more completely. Suffering, struggle, trials, hardship, tribulations, difficulties and the like will be used interchangeably to describe, as Webster’s defines, “To undergo, to experience: the enduring of death, pain, distress.”

Statement of Limitations

In conjunction with the limits and parameters set by the author above, this thesis project will be limited in the following ways. First, this thesis will not cover all the discipleship models in current church culture. Second, this thesis project will not give all possible discipleship applications for local churches. There are various methods and principles that are valid and effective in discipling people that will not be covered in this project. This project will attempt to cover some basic biblical principles set forth for the Church to apply rightly in their specific culture and reality, but is not exhaustive in its nature. The principles of this thesis project are not meant to be prescriptive for the Church. The application of this thesis project is meant only to be suggestive in nature, based on the author’s opinion, research, and experiences. Third, this thesis project has not identified an exhaustive listing of leaders and churches that are currently discipling people. Fourth, the suggested applications of this thesis project are not meant to solve all discipleship problems of a church, or be exhaustive in nature. Fifth, the churches and leaders in this project are from a variety of backgrounds and denominations; no preferential treatment was given to a particular church or denomination. Sixth, this project is not meant to provide a step-by-step process for implementation of a new discipleship model, it is meant to be principles

and suggestions for application. Seventh, the research that has been conducted for this project, both historical and current, is not exhaustive. Eight, the conclusions made in this project are the opinions of the author and are not meant to be derogatory or exclusive. This project is based on five key biblical principles that are identified by the author in the Scriptures. The applications of this thesis project are meant to be used by church leaders to better understand and apply the discipleship principles in their culture.

**Theoretical Basis**

The relationship between the spiritual struggles and spiritual formation has a history almost as long as the world itself. God has been crafting pure faith in the same place that pure gold is made, in the heat of the fire. The fire of adversity is the optimal place for refinement and growth for humanity, and has been throughout the course of history. “Spiritual formation is the process whereby the Word of God is applied by the Spirit of God to the heart and mind of the child of God so that she or he becomes more like the Son of God.”

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pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

The idea of connecting the reality of pain to people’s understanding of God is ancient. The etymology of how to align one’s understanding between internal beings and external circumstances was the very purpose of historical philosophy. “The ancient Greek philosophers believed that the very purpose of philosophy was to discover how to face evil, suffering, and death well.” In fact, Ferry points out in his historical work that, “only philosophy or religion can possibly help us deal with pain and death.” Moreover, on this basis of Greek philosophy, “writers such as Cyprian, Ambrose, and later Augustine made the case that Christians suffered and died better and this was empirical, visible evidence that Christianity was the supreme philosophy. The difference between the pagan and Christian population in this regard were significant enough to give real credibility to Christian claims.” The Church has broad historical shoulders to stand on when discipling its people through adversity. The great theologian Martin Luther once counseled church leaders as to how they should approach spiritual formation, proclaiming, “For you have to inflict the wound in a way that you also know how to alleviate and heal it. You have to be severe in such a way as not to forget kindness. Thus God, too, puts lightning into the rain and breaks up the gloomy clouds and a dark sky into fruitful showers.”

Theologically, the work of redemption combines the present brokenness of this world and the promise of the new life that is to come. This is historical spiritual formation: Cross and empty tomb. “The Christian doctrine of suffering asks for more than a patient tolerance of

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18 Ibid., 42.
suffering...The pain and suffering of life fix our spiritual vision on the central, spiritual goods of ...the redemption of Christ.” Christianity, historically begins to makes sense of the suffering and pain that people experience in this broken world. The four-fold theological framework of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration becomes the basis for being able to understand and appreciate the meaning of the human condition with and without Christ. It is ultimately through the theology of the Cross; the connection between pain and growth is seen. Martin Luther regarded the theology of the Cross to be the most important understanding that anyone could possess. Luther said, “He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.” Luther was said to have regarded Jesus’ cry from the cross, “My God, my God—why have you forsaken me” as “the greatest words in all the Scripture.” The paradox of glory and suffering is heard in these final words from Christ. The Son of man is dying on the cross of a sinner to bring about the glorious redemption of those sinners who put him there. The theological connection between adversity and growth is the heart of Christian thought and experience. Christians should not be surprised or distraught when faced with adversity and suffering; Jesus Himself experienced these throughout his life. Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend remind us, “how the growth process, at its very core, is theological.” God’s great work is the changing of His people, through adversity and pain, to change history.

Both the Old and New Testaments are full of stories and principles for dealing with struggle and growing closer to God through them. The Bible speaks words of authority and

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20 Keller, Walking with God, 30.
22 Matt 27:46. (ESV)
23 Rittgers, Reformation of Suffering, 117.
clarity into our hearts. As Wayne Grudem explains in his systematic theology, “The clarity of the Scriptures means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help and being willing to follow it.”25 The Bible is written in such a way that all the things needed to know for salvation and Christian growth are clear. As the psalmist wrote about the Bible, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”26 The author might add, especially during the darkest hours of the journey.

Genesis 3 is where struggle and suffering enter into the history of humanity. Stephen Miller, in his Compete Guide to the Bible writes, “Genesis is when a perfectly good world goes bad.”27 The first few chapters of the Bible make it clear that suffering and pain are ultimately the result of sin. Sometimes struggle can be linked to sin, and sometimes they are linked to the sins of others, all are linked to the sin of Adam and Eve “in the beginning.” Pastor Tim Keller writes, “Suffering begins when Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23-24). Their exile is the original infliction of pain and suffering.”28

The history of struggle continues in a line of succession throughout biblical and current history. There are many biblical examples of people who experienced great struggle but also tremendous growth in their personal faith. Biblical characters such as, but not limited to, Joseph, Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Job experienced great struggle and great spiritual growth.

Joseph, whom more of the book Genesis is written about than any other man, experiences unimaginable circumstances of pain and grief. Joseph’s own brothers sell him into slavery (Genesis 37). All of Joseph’s dreams are crushed at the hands of his own flesh and blood. Joseph,  

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26 Ps 119:105 (KJV).
28 Keller, Walking with God, 131.
however, remained faithful to God through the trials of his life and grew in faith and favor. Joseph at the end of his life, a life filled with trials and triumph said these iconic words, “As for me, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

The prophet Jeremiah writes to the people of God in exile in Jeremiah, Chapter 29. The people of God were taken from their homes, family, and temple and carried away to the pagan city of Babylon. Biblically, there is no recorded people group that ever returned home from forced exile. The people of God are desperate, persecuted and enslaved by a foreign kingdom that worshiped pagan gods. The prophet Jeremiah reveals the purpose to pain that is being presently experienced. Jeremiah says to the suffering people of God, “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Jeremiah continues his letter to the elders of Israel writing, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” In other words, the plan of God for the pain of His people was directly linked to the purpose of God for other people.

As much as a third of the Psalter is comprised of laments. “The primary purpose of the laments is to lay a troubled situation before the Lord, asking Him for help. There are community laments and individual laments for troubles that were faced in this world.” The author heard another pastor once say of the Psalms, “If it was not for pain and struggle, we would not have the Psalms.” The Psalms stand as a biblical response to the pain and suffering that we as people experience on this side of the garden of Eden.

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29 Gen 50:20 (ESV).
30 Jer 29:7 (ESV).
31 Jer 29:11 (ESV).
32 C. John Collins, The ESV Study Bible, 940.
Job, of course, is the ultimate example of suffering and trial in the Old Testament. Even in modern history, the story of Job is evoked to recall the nature of suffering and the principles to be gained from it. The story of Job teaches that not all suffering and pain is the direct result of one’s sinful actions. As Pastor Tim Keller reminds us, “God condemns Job’s friends for their insistence that Job’s pain and suffering had to be caused by a life of moral inferiority.”33 This is an essential Biblical perspective gained from Job about trials and their cause.

The word suffering in the New Testament is the Greek word, thlipsesin. Thlipsesin, according to The Bible Knowledge Commentary, carries the meaning of, “afflictions, distresses, and pressures.”34 The author wonders how many in our congregations would say they have some afflictions, distresses, and pressures in their lives? The New Testament writers use this word all throughout their writings and letters to the Church. The Christian Church has historically been a suffering and struggling Church; serving a suffering savior. In fact, the prophet Isaiah describes Jesus as, “a man of sorrows.”35 The New Testament writers were also men of sorrows, familiar with afflictions, distresses, and pressures of life. However, they also understood the profound difference that their faith in Christ could make in how they handled those struggles and overcame them. The Bible calls trials and troubles, walking through fire (Isaiah 43:2) or a fiery ordeal (I Peter 4:12.) But it also likens suffering to a fiery furnace (I Peter 1:6-7).

The apostle Paul writes to the Church about the strong relationship that exists between our personal struggles and discipleship. One such instance is found in Romans 5:1-5, Paul writes,

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not

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33 Keller, Walking with God, 29.
35 Isa 53:3a (ESV).
only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.\(^{36}\)

Paul is expressing the hope that all Christians now have because of their righteousness found in Christ through personal faith. The apostle Paul admonishes the church at Rome, its members and leaders alike, with a statement about how our struggles and trials can produce more faith if handled appropriately. In fact, Paul gives us a step-by-step guide for life transformation through suffering. People do not rejoice in the trials and struggles of this life; they rejoice in their faith, growing as a result. Moreover, Paul writes about his own relationship between faith and struggle in II Corinthians 12. Paul describes a thorn that he has in his flesh. The nature of the thorn given to Paul is never completely understood. One commentary states,

The nature of this thorn or messenger is much disputed. The most frequently proposed possibilities include: (1) Paul’s inner psychological struggles (such as grief over his earlier persecution of the church, or sorrow over Israel’s unbelief, or continuing temptations); (2) Paul’s opponents, who continued to persecute him (cf. Numbers 33:55 and Ezekiel 28:24, where thorns refer to Israel’s enemies); (3) some kind of physical affliction (possibly poor eyesight, malaria fever or severe migraine headaches); (4) some kind of demonic harassment (“a messenger of Satan”). Most commentators cautiously prefer some form of the third view, since “thorn in the flesh” would seem to suggest some physical condition.\(^{37}\)

Paul ends this section of writing on struggle and personal faith by saying famously to the Corinthians and to us in II Corinthians 12:10, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am week, then I am strong.”\(^{38}\)

\(^{36}\) Rom 5:1-5 (ESV).

\(^{37}\) Scott Hafemann, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2238.

\(^{38}\) II Cor 12:10 (ESV).
James, the pastor of the Jerusalem church grasps the tension between the trials of life and the producing of greater faith. James says in his pastoral letter to, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trial of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you many be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4) James is encouraging his people and fellow Church leaders to seize the opportunity for growing our faith through the various trials and tribulations of life. James is writing to believers, specifically, to believing Jews who have been scattered among persecution. “Every trial becomes a test of faith designed to strengthen. If the believer fails the test by wrongly responding, that test then becomes a temptation, or a solicitation to evil.”39 James is emphasizing to the biblical community about the importance of handling trials and struggles correctly.

The ultimate biblical example of how to handle trials and adversity is modeled to us by Christ. “Always, no matter the circumstances, we have the assurance of ‘Immanuel,’ which simply means ‘God with us.’”40 Churches learn about how to handle adversity from the word Immanuel, Jesus came to be with us in out rebellion and pain. “In light of the cross, suffering becomes purification, not punishment.”41 Jesus, through pain, becomes the author and the perfector of one’s faith. It is through the example of Jesus that followers learn how to grow their faith through personal struggle. The Church, through Christ’s model, learns how to say no to the social gospel, to the cheap and empty philosophies of pleasure and prosperity. The Church can learn to say yes to the biblical model of discipleship through adversity because, “The Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory.”42

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42 John 1:14 (ESV).
The Statement of Methodology

This thesis attempts to empower church leaders by producing a discipleship guide for struggling people in their congregations. This thesis will endeavor to move people from asking the question of ‘why’ difficult things happen to them to ‘how’ God can grow their faith through difficulty. Based upon the Scriptures, multiple books and journals, historical and current discipleship models, surveys of current church leaders, and the author’s personal experiences and perspectives, this thesis project will present five key biblical principles to encourage and empower church discipleship through adversity. The principles presented in this thesis project will reveal how God has used personal adversity to grow the faith of His people throughout history. This thesis project seeks to remind current Church leaders of what the pastor of the Church at Jerusalem said about adversity and its desired discipleship result, “…that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

The cultural, biblical, and theological basis for the thesis project is discussed in Chapter One. In Chapter Two, an overview of the cultural realities and the current discipleship models and practices in the Church are reviewed. In Chapter Three, the five biblical discipleship principles of perspective, perseverance, power, peace and platform are introduced. Chapter Four will provide Church leaders a model and guide for how to implement the five discipleship principles into their church. Chapter Five will give a concluding encouragement to church leaders, stating the great need for discipleship in and through adversity.

The problem, once again stated, is that many church leaders are not able to disciple their people through personal adversity. The Church has been paralyzed by a cultural gospel comprised of the dual false messages of prosperity and pleasure. Many people will not accept

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43 Jas 1:4b (ESV).
that adversity could be employed by God to grow their faith. Moreover, many church leaders do not account for personal adversity in their discipleship model and programs. If the Church is to effectively disciple people in today’s culture, it must understand and develop a discipleship strategy that accounts for key biblical principles and the common hardships of life. Through the collection of data from surveys, research of current research and literature on discipleship, identifying prevalent discipleship models and leaders, and the author’s own personal stories and experiences, this thesis project will offer practical discipleship principles and solutions for church leaders.

Chapter One of this thesis project states the purpose of the project as well as the problem to be addressed. The chapter also gives the cultural and church context in which the problem exists. The foundation for the project is laid in Chapter One through the theological, biblical, historical, cultural, and experiential arguments. Chapter One addresses a limited number of issues that are systemic of the social gospel, namely, cultural gospel philosophies. Chapter One includes a literary review of the most important scriptures and literature for this project.

Chapter Two is an overview of the basic tenants of the cultural gospel; prosperity and pleasure. The chapter begins by giving a more in-depth review of these adversarial cultural philosophies the Church must disciple people in. The chapter gives the current conditions of discipleship from various literature focusing of modern day discipleship in the local church. Moreover, the chapter details several discipleship models that are prevalent in the local church today. Research was accomplished through a survey of local church leaders, those who are currently discipling others, in regards to their discipleship principles, practices, and attitudes. In addition, the survey ascertained how personal adversity has helped to shape and disciple people within the local church context.
Chapter Three will define and overview the five biblical keys for discipling people through personal adversity. This chapter will give the foundational biblical principles for local church leaders to then build a discipleship orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The objective of Chapter Three is to clearly present the five biblical keys for discipleship through adversity, against the backdrop of the current realities and problems presented in Chapters One and Two. The research for this chapter was ascertained by examining the whole of the Scriptures and finding the common discipleship themes weaved throughout its history. Specifically, Genesis 35-50; Job; John 14; John 16:33; James 1:2-4; Romans 5:1-7; Romans 8:18, 20-24; II Corinthians; Philippians 3:7-16; Hebrews 2:10; Hebrews 11; Hebrews 12:1-3, James 1:2-5, and I Peter 4:16 have helped to shape these five Discipleship keys.

Chapter Four will address the ministry applications of the five discipleship keys given in Chapter Three. In light of the problems and the principles addressed in previous chapters, Chapter Four will give a suggested holistic discipleship model and practices for churches to consider. This chapter will focus on the direct applications for local church leaders to implement in their current ministry settings. The discipleship model given will be holistic in nature, addressing both the philosophy (H4: Head, Heart, Hands, Habits) and the corresponding practices. In this chapter, the five biblical keys for discipling people through adversity will be combined with a suggested model for local church discipleship.

Chapter Five is the conclusion to the thesis project. This chapter will bring together all of the research, principles, and model of the previous chapters. The author will restate the current problem and the keys principles of the thesis project. Moreover, the author will give final arguments as to why discipling people through their adversity, employing the five biblical keys, is essential in the local church today.
Review of Literature

Instrumental to this project is the 2013 book by Pastor Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*.44 Keller gives a foundation, biblically and theologically, for how Christians should handle pain and suffering. Pastor Tim Keller presents an understanding of suffering, a rational for why it happens to us, and a guide for walking through suffering as a Christian. The work moves from theoretical to practical in addresses the problems of suffering of life. As Keller argues, “suffering is everywhere, unavoidable, and its scope often overwhelms.”45 The book emphasizes the problem of pain for all people, and the practical answers that Christ and His Church can provide. Walking with God through pain and suffering is an interwoven process. The author writes that, first, commit to ‘walking with God’ through suffering. Walking with God is a deeply biblical metaphor. One of the best-known verses in the Bible, Psalm 23:4, speaks to this metaphorical action by walking with God through the darkest valley, fearing no evil. Second, in the face of adversity, weep. “There is seldom a place provided for lamentation in the church, and down to the present day, many do not give sufferers the freedom to weep and cry out.”46 Third, trust God in the midst of our suffering and trial. The author adds the story of Joseph from the Old Testament as the perfect example of the hidden God in complete control. Fourth, pray to God in our time of despair. Tell God what we are feeling and allow Him to hear it first. The laments of the Psalms should be the guide in these suffering prayers. Fifth, the author says to think, thank, and love during pain. “Comfort others with the comfort we have received.”47 This comforting of others is good thinking, thanking, and loving. Lastly, the process

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44 Keller, *Walking With God*.
46 Ibid., 246.
47 II Cor 1:4 (ESV).
of walking with God through pain and suffering requires hope. “There is nothing more practical for sufferers than to have hope. The erosion of hope is what makes suffering unbearable.”

Discipleship must encompass a guide for growing through adversity.

Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend’s book, How People Grow, is a foundational book for the understanding of discipleship through difficulty. The main function of this book is to give an account for what the Bible says about personal growth. Many church leaders have been trained in discipleship and pasturing, however, many have not taken into account personal adversity in the process of personal growth. How People Grow gives an overview of the biblical picture of humanity, and then points out the various components of how the master gardener grows his people. The authors talk about good pain, that is, the pain that has redemptive value. The Church must be able to identify good pain and see the greater purpose of how God is using it to grow us through it. As the authors state about this growth process, “suffering is the path Jesus modeled for us, and he modeled how to do it right. He went through it all without sin and with obedience. This is the difference between those who suffer to a good end and those who suffer to no good end at all.”

George Barna’s work, Growing True Disciples, is written to give church leaders a realistic view of discipleship and the ability to see if it is truly working. As Barna opens the book, he shares that, “Most Christian churches try to have a positive impact upon society and individuals. The big question is whether what they are doing is working.” The author gives definition and action to what it means to disciple a person. The book also delivers great data and

48 Keller, Walking with God, 313.
49 Cloud and Townsend, How People Grow.
50 Ibid., 214.
51 Barna, Growing True Disciples.
52 Ibid., 7.
research to the challenge of effective discipleship. The work is a great tool for church leaders to understand what discipleship is, and to be able to look at effective models and actions that make it effective.

A book by George Barna, *User Friendly Churches*, was very helpful in thinking about the implementation of the principles presented in this thesis project.\(^{53}\) The author describes what makes a church appealing to the people that the church is trying to reach. The author describes user-friendly churches as those that are internally healthy, not as those who continually try to market to their audience. Barna offers characteristics and attitudes that have proven successful in healthy churches. The author defines a user-friendly church in this way, “A user-friendly church is a church that is in touch with the needs of those it wants to serve.”\(^{54}\) This work calls the Church to take seriously the exercise of examining the human realities and burdens people carry through their doors every week. Barna argues, “None of the successful churches described in this book is interested in being user friendly in the sense of compromising the gospel or the historic faith of the church just to make friends with the age.”\(^{55}\)

A work that helped in the writing of this thesis project was, *The Grand Weaver* by Ravi Zacharias.\(^{56}\) Zacharias argues that God uses events throughout the course of our lives to shape us into His people. In other words, God uses both good and difficult events to grow us into His perfect image. The author presents his case for why lives are not just a collection of random events, but rather, a carefully woven tapestry designed by God. God made people in His image, but also unique. How God made people is important to the process of how He is currently

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\(^{54}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 16.

shaping lives. The author makes his case for how God shapes lives by events, leading us into a theology of who God is, and how that affects the way situations are handled. This work is important for understanding that even the most difficult and painful events of our life can have redemptive meaning and purpose in God’s growth work.

*The Emotionally Healthy Church* by Peter Scazzero is a book that contributed to this thesis project. The effective work of the Church, in discipling its people through adversity, is the heart of what is at stake in this project. The author presents compelling arguments for how to disciple people in a way that actually works. Much of what is argued by the author is in the realm of the “missing link” of emotional well-being. Peter Scazzero declares, “The sad truth is that too little difference exists, in terms of emotional and relational maturity, between God’s people inside the church and those outside who claim no relationship to Jesus Christ.” The author, a pastor, goes on to discuss how many churches are in trouble when it comes to discipleship. The book is filled with examples of how the Church is often out of touch with the average person’s struggles and sadness. The book also gives practical principles for how to disciple people with the truth of God and the truth of our current broken realities. The emotionally healthy church is one that is living in the liberating truth of who God is in the midst of the truth of our current reality. The author directs much of his writings to church leaders. He writes, “The overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily on the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership.”

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58 Ibid., 17.

59 Ibid., 20.
A helpful book, in thinking about health of a Church and its discipleship impact on the lives of others, is *Becoming a Healthy Church* by Stephen Macchia.60 The author discusses the traits of every healthy church, with healthy meaning the faithful ministry of Christ to a broken world. Interestingly, the author lists love, acceptance, and forgiveness as the number one indicator of a healthy church. The author, and his team, researched over one hundred churches in his quests to define the traits of healthy churches. He writes that, “The healthiest churches we visited created an environment of acceptance. People could enter just the way they were, allowing the Holy Spirit to do the refining work within their hearts.”61 Creating a church model for growing people through adversity must include a culture of love and acceptance for those who are hurting from the troubles of this world.

Jim Kallam authored a book on authentic on creating churches where people feel at home entitled, *Risking Church*. This book is comprised of the author’s personal and pastoral experiences and stories within today’s local church. The book makes the case for why the Church is needed in times of difficulty and trouble. The Church was created as a community and a community is where people feel most at home. This book was helpful in thinking about how Churches can become places of healing and growth for those who are experiencing struggle. Kallam uses the phrase, “struggling well together”62 to describe how churches can partner with people in the midst of their pain for redemptive purpose. The author describes the personal needs of safety, vision, wisdom, power, along with the Christ-given purposes of the local church. The author observes, “In a world where our pictures of ourselves are so distorted, it’s such a relief to come to church and have a

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61 Ibid., 19.
handful of people love me and tell me the truth.” The author helped shape this thesis project towards the power of transforming the Church’s experience of struggle through discipleship.

Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges authored a book about discipleship and the leaders that accomplish it entitled, *The Servant Leader*. The servant leader is the type of leader that God wants to use to disciple other people. The end goal of discipleship is to become better servants of God. As the apostle Paul wrote, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.” The authors describe the journey of becoming a servant leader, someone that God can use fully for his kingdom purposes. The book describes the full engagement of a servant leader as encompassing their heart, head, hands, and habits. It is important for church leaders, who are charged with discipling others, to remember that discipleship is not just a head, or knowledge, endeavor. The authors remind that, “Leadership is first a matter of the heart.” This book provided a great framework for implementing discipleship principles for church leaders in a holistic manner.

Larry Crabb’s book, *The Safest Place on Earth* offered great perspective on people’s need for safe community and the unique position of the Church to offer it. Crabb offers ways of thinking about community in a spiritual need way. God has created us with a desire to be in right community with Him and His people, the Church. The principles of this thesis project are discovered and practiced best in the context of community. The author declares, “The church is a community of people on a journey with God. Wherever there is supernatural togetherness and


65 1 Cor 3:5 (ESV).

66 Blanchard and Hodges, *The Servant Leader, 15*.

Spirit-directed movement, there is the church—a spiritual community.”\(^68\) Crabb couples his teaching about spiritual community through the church, with an understanding of struggles and how to relate to them properly. The author adds in this section a very helpful description of what it means to live in both a broken world and an eternal one. Crabb’s teaching on the two rooms has become a pillar for understanding one’s broken reality and an abiding eternal home in Christ. The lower room is the sinful physical world and nature, “the upper room is the new self Christ gives to any who ask, a higher, better nature that draws its energy from Christ Himself.”\(^69\)

A work by Larry Crabb foundational to this project is his work, *Connecting*.\(^70\) In this work, the author presents a vision for people being healed through their connecting relationships to one another. For the purposes of this thesis project, this work provides a foundation for the context that healing and growth best happens in, relationships. Larry Crabb presents three ingredients for a healing community. First, believers need to have a taste of how much Christ delights in us. Crabb remarks, “We must stand firmly against humanistic error. But we must not stand so far away that we fail to appreciate the gospel truth that humanism counterfeits.”\(^71\) The second ingredient that Crabb gives for healing connections is a diligent search for what is good. People who grow through adversity look for how God is at work in their life and the lives of others around them. Lastly, Crabb makes the argument for healing communities that engage in the exposure of bad or painful. Crabb adds here that God, “exposes the bad to reveal the good.”\(^72\) Connecting relationships are the context of growing our faith through adversity.


\(^{69}\) Ibid., 61.


\(^{71}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 20.
The Problem of Pain by C.S. Lewis is another resource that provided great insights about the effects of pain on our personal faith. Lewis offers a view of the divine and the theological tension between the character of God and the character of humanity. The essence of Lewis’ work is focused on the proper thinking and understanding of God when pain is present in our lives. Lewis centers on the fallen nature of man as the cause of pain, moreover, the wickedness of people towards one another. Lewis recounts his own pain, and how his feelings about pain are the same as all of humanity: “If we could find a way out of sorrow we would crawl to it.” However, Lewis adds, “I am not arguing that pain is not painful. Pain hurts. That is what the word means. I am only trying to show that the old Christian doctrine of being made perfect through suffering is not incredible. To prove it palatable is beyond my design.” Lewis is very helpful in thinking about the design of pain and suffering, but is also fully human in his resistance to the experience of pain.

Another valuable work that helped to mold the author’s view of the Church and its part in helping people grow through adversity is Dave Browning’s book, Deliberate Simplicity. Browning writes about the need for the local church to remain simple and focused on its mission in the world. The author argues, “Complexity has been a prevailing trend in modernity, but people are not wired for it naturally.” Sin and brokenness brings all forms adversity, one of those forms is complexity. The fallen nature of this world brings complexity and busyness. Browning makes a compelling argument for churches to remain intentional and simple. The reality of people is busy, complex, struggle. The Church should provide an alternate culture for healing and discipleship. In

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73 Lewis, The Problem of Pain.
74 Ibid., 105
75 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 23.
other words, less is more when it comes to the work of the Church. When the average person comes into a church, they are looking for something to bring healing into their lives. Often times the complexity of the church structure can prevent them from accessing the help they need. Deliberate simplicity is an admonishment to the Church to take seriously the task it is uniquely called to.

An important work for the author that describes the type of Church that disciples people well is *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. Warren states, “What really attracts large numbers of unchurched to a church is changed lives—a lot of changed lives. People want to go where lives are being changed, where hurts are healed, and where hope is restored.” Warren argues that people want to have their hurts and needs addressed at church, and they want to be able to invite others to experience the same. Changed lives are the key to growing the local church. There may be no better way to evidence these types of changed lives than addressing how to deal with adversity well. Warren argues, “Churches are filled with people who have attended services for their entire lives, yet are still spiritual babies. An assimilated member is not the same as a mature member.” The church must have a thoughtful strategic plan for moving members from the pew to maturity and leadership within the church.

Philip Yancey contributed a very important work to this thesis project entitled, *The Question that Never Goes Away*. Yancey speaks to the question that everyone asks when he or she experience adversity and pain: Why? Yancey literally shifts the emphasis from the question of ‘why’ to the question of ‘how’ God can use pain to grow us and show us more of Him. Yancey remarks, “We need one thing even more than we need answers to the question Why? We need an affirmation of

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79 Ibid., 247.
80 Ibid., 332.
God’s presence in our grief.” Yancey makes the case for how our faith can be encouraged and grown through deep anguish and challenge. There can be a healing that leaves one much stronger than before. Yancey remarks, “Only a suffering God can answer whether this planet is worth the cost.”

A work by Phillip Yancey very important to this thesis project was a work entitled, *Church: Why Bother?* Yancey writes of his personal experience with the Church growing up, specifically, the disconnect he perceived existed between the church and reality. Yancey speaks about the temptation for people to leave the church when their needs are not met or when they perceive flaws in the foundation. However, it is essential the community of God remain connected to a local church, especially in the midst of trials and adversity. Yancey remarks, “When I stood outside the church looking in, I found much to criticize. But once I fully entered the church, I realized the difficulty in sustaining anything like the New Testament vision of what the church should be.” The Church is broken and imperfect because it’s made up of broken and imperfect people; however, the Church is the instrument that God intended to use to bring him glory and people good; it is essential for the work of discipleship.

Andy Stanley, Reggie Joiner, and Lane Jones wrote a foundational book entitled *7 Practices of Effective Ministry.* The book is a strategy for how to implement practices for optimal local church ministry. The book is written to churches that desire to match their practices with their desired outcomes. Many churches are tempted to provide a flurry of activities without thinking how they actually move people. The authors make the argument that the movement of people is critical within

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82 Yancey, *The Question*, 86.
83 Ibid., 87.
85 Ibid., 72.
the church. The Church must clarify what the ‘win’ is and then center everything on ‘winning’ as a team. This work helped to contribute to the practical outcomes of what it looks like to disciple people well within the Church. The book declares, “First determine where you want people to be. Then figure out how you’re going to get them there. That’s doing ministry with the end in mind.”87 Intention is not enough, the church must provide practical steps and programs to accomplish the stated goal.

A resource by Andy Stanley that was helpful for this thesis project was *Deep and Wide.*88 Deep and Wide is the personal account of how NorthPoint Community Church was birthed and designed. Stanley challenges us to ask and answer two critical questions, 1. What is the Church? and 2. Who is it for? Stanley argues that, “Your answers to these questions should shape your approach to church ministry. It is often the disconnect between the answer people give to these two questions and approaches they adopt that creates the tension they experience.”89 Stanley writes about the ingredients that lead to a growing faith, practical teaching, private disciplines, personal ministry, providential relationships, and pivotal circumstances. For this thesis project, the understanding that pivotal circumstances add to our discipleship process is most helpful. Stanley observes, “When people describe their faith journey, they always include events that could be described as defining moments...these defining moments involve pain and disappointment.”90

John Ortberg contributed to this thesis project through his work, *The Me I Want to Be.*91 Ortberg argues that discipleship is the process of identifying who God made you to be and carefully ordering your world around this picture of God’s design. Often, the desire is based on a

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87 Stanley, Joiner and Lane, 7 Practices of Effective Ministry, 90.
89 Ibid., 56.
90 Ibid., 137.
vivid picture of who people do not desire to be. It is through struggle and pain they get a picture of what they do not desire to become. Ortberg remarks, “Spiritual formation is the process by which your inner self and character are shaped...everyone’s inner life is being formed—for better or for worse.”⁹² Ortberg’s work then describes the components and process for spiritual formation today, the most important task of becoming who you are meant to be in Christ.

Kate Bowler’s foundational work on the American Prosperity movement entitled Blessed: The History of the American Prosperity Gospel⁹³ was an important reference for this project. Bowler is a professor at Duke Divinity School and has written a history of the prosperity gospel movement in America. Bowler’s findings were most helpful in understanding the effects of the prosperity gospel on mainstream evangelicalism. Bowler reminds us that, “At almost any moment, day or night, the American public can tune in to these preachers—on TV, radio, podcasts, and in their megachurches—to hear the message that God desires to bless them with wealth and health.”⁹⁴ The ‘prosperity’ or ‘cultural’ gospel has been embraced in the mainstream media and influenced a majority of evangelical Christians. This philosophy, along with secularism, has adversely affected how Christians handle adversity and what they believe about the nature of adversity. Bowler argues that the prosperity gospel is changing the landscape of the American church and its ministry.

There are several foundational scriptures for this project. The scriptures provide the foundational values for the stated principles and applications of this thesis project. The story of Joseph (Genesis 35-50) and the ‘hidden God’ that is a part of every scene is important to this thesis project. Joseph believes that God is able to do good for others, and us, through much struggle. Joseph could only come to believe this foundational truth through his own personal struggle and subsequent growth.

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⁹² Ortberg, The Me I Want to Be, 29.
⁹⁴ Ibid., forward.
Moses sits by a well in the middle of nowhere, Midian, contemplating what will become of his tormented life. The answer, of course, is that God was going to use this great personal struggle to develop a great person of faith and leadership. Exodus 2:15 is one of the pivotal circumstances that forms Moses. This was a man who experienced incredible pain and struggle, and through them became one of the most formidable leaders the world has ever known.

The Apostle Paul understood it was not his personal victory, wealth, or successes he would grow, but only by identifying completely with Christ Jesus. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:4-9,

> Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

Paul states in Philippians 1:29, “you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.” He writes to his disciple Timothy, “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God.”

Paul continues with his writing about faith and suffering in II Corinthians 11:16-33 as he describes the sufferings he has endured as an apostle of Jesus. He concludes with this declaration about growing our faith in the midst of weakness and pain,

> So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the

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95 II Tim 1:8 (ESV).
more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Apostle Paul’s writings about his sufferings and faith are echoed again in II Corinthians 1:3-11 when he talks about sharing with Christ in suffering and in comfort. Again in II Corinthians 4:7-12 as Paul compares our lives as jars of clay holding the treasure of Christ. It is to show the surpassing power of Christ in us that affliction is experienced in every way, “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.”96 Moreover, II Corinthians 6:3-10 Paul presents himself and his fellow servants as those who have endured together the sufferings of Christ and the power of Christ. Paul writes in I Corinthians 15:43 that the resurrected faith life is “Sown in weakness; it is raised in power.” Paul reminds us in his letter to the Church at Rome “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?”97 Paul goes onto write that, no, nothing will come between Christ and us. These present sufferings will not keep Christians from knowing Christ, in fact, they drive them towards Him. Paul continues in his letter to the Church at Rome by writing in Romans 5:3-5,

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Paul ministered to the Church at Lystra, Iconium, and to Antioch, and Luke 14:22 describes Paul and Barnabas, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

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96 II Cor 4:10 (ESV).
97 Rom 8:35 (ESV).
The Apostle and Pastor James writes to the Church in Jerusalem about personal faith and the trials of life. He addresses the issues of trials and how a Christian can handle them, James writes, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”98

Moreover, the writer of Hebrews reminds, “For it was fitting that He, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.”99 And, Hebrews 5:8, “although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”

The Apostle Peter writes to the Church, “if anyone suffers as a Christians, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.”100

Finally, but certainly not exhaustively, Jesus teaches his disciples in the Gospel of John about how to handle the coming hardship of the world, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world do I give you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”101 These instructions are given to the disciples from Jesus in John 16:33, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

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98 Jas 1:2-4 (ESV).
99 Heb 2:10 (ESV).
100 I Pet 4:16 (ESV).
101 John 14:27 (ESV).
CHAPTER 2
CURRENT CULTURAL REALITIES AND DISCIPLESHIP PARADIGMS

ELEMENTS OF THE CULTURAL GOSPEL

The current reality of our churches and societies has been greatly influenced by what has become known as the cultural gospel. The cultural gospel is comprised of two key elements: pleasure and prosperity. Both of these elements, in and of themselves, are good and given by God. However, when a good thing becomes the ultimate thing, sin is afoot. The cultural gospel essentially takes what is good and makes it an ultimate in our lives. These good elements of pleasure and prosperity become the ultimate measure and end of life. What is mysteriously missing from the cultural gospel is any mention of our own sin, repentance, suffering, trouble, pain, and tribulations. The brokenness of our lives and this world remind us this is not our ultimate home, and the universe is not operating, as it should be. Pain and adversity are necessary components to the true Christian Gospel, and yet are missing from the cultural gospel that is pervasive in our current reality of life.

The cultural gospel is literally robbing people of the salvation and sanctification God desires to give His people. In an effort to relieve suffering, or avoid it altogether, people have also avoided the message of the cross and the saving grace of God. The two great thieves of pleasure and prosperity give hurting and confused people a cheap substitute for the true Christian Gospel. Moreover, they take away the opportunity for God, through His Church, to speak meaning and life into the dark and desperate places of this world. Understanding the etymology of these cultural elements gives us insight into the destructive force the cultural gospel is having on our culture and our churches.
The first element of the cultural gospel is pleasure. Pleasure, of course, is not a negative element in and of itself. However, when pleasure is presented as the chief end of man, as the ultimate good news, is quite dangerous. Many people have traded their eternal inheritance for a temporal moment of pleasure; a moment of relief. Cultural pleasure is an effective counterfeit to the authentic pleasure found in and through the message of the cross and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Personal pleasure is the ultimate outcome and personal offer of secularism.

Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who survived three years in the Nazi death camps observed, “…how some of his fellow prisoners were able to endure the horror and pass through it while others could not. The difference came down to what Frankl called meaning. The problem is that contemporary people think life is all about finding happiness.”¹ Frankl went on to say that people who had pleasure as their chief end to life were unable to make it through the horrendous ordeal, but those who had meaning as their ultimate pursuit were able to endure. Frankl continued, “In other words, you have meaning only when there is something in life more important than your own personal freedom and happiness, something for which you are glad to sacrifice happiness.”² Conversely, Elie Wiesel describes his first night in a Nazi death camp in his famous work, Night. Wiesel writes about how the pain and suffering he witnessed destroyed his faith in God. Wiesel writes, “Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever…Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.”³ The pursuit of meaning in one’s life or the pursuit of pleasure, have very different results when faced with great pain and suffering. None of us would challenge the real experiences and feelings that both Frankl and Wiesel when faced with unimaginable horror. The

¹ Keller, Walking with God, 70.
² Ibid., 71.
personal outcomes of Frankl and Wiesel after enduring similar horrors are, however, telling as the cultural realities of a pleasure-based gospel are explored.

Secularism is chiefly responsible for the pleasure element of the cultural gospel. Secularism, and its view of ultimate reality, drives people to pursue happiness and pleasure for themselves at all costs. As the famous secularist Richard Dawkins writes, “Secularism sees ultimate reality as cold and indifferent and extinction as inevitable.”

Dawkins continues writing about secularism when he adds, “the reason people struggle so mightily in the face of suffering is because they will not accept that it never has any purpose. It is senseless, neither bad nor good.”

The philosophy of secularism does not present itself to the culture in this manner. Instead, secularism masquerades as pleasure and speaks to the individual desire for pleasure and relief in a hurting world. Dawkins exclaims, in short that, “suffering does not have any meaning at all. It is an evil hiccups. Life is empty, pointless, futile, a desert of meaninglessness and insignificance…and to look to any spiritual resources to find purpose or meaning in the face of suffering is infantile.”

This statement by Dawkins is an incredible indictment and commentary on the fruitlessness of secularism.

Secularism is a powerful counterfeit to the Gospel of Jesus Christ because it presents to people the final result of the Gospel (pleasure through relationship with Jesus Christ) but without the brokenness and repentance required to achieve it. In the end, this is at the heart of the great lie of the cultural gospel: You can have the benefits of the cross without the blood. Secularism disputes the notion that one can discover meaning through adversity and pain, as Christianity asserts. In contrast, secularism believes one must avoid all pain or fix the pain as quickly as possible.

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possible in order to move towards greater pleasure. In fact, the secular response to suffering is quite defined, especially as it is compared to other worldview perspectives. Keller observes that secularism has a defined message to answer the cause, response, and resolution to the “understanding of suffering.”

Table 2.1. Schematic Way to Understand Secularism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Moralistic</th>
<th>Self-Transcendent</th>
<th>Fatalistic</th>
<th>Dualistic</th>
<th>Secular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cause</strong></td>
<td>Wrongdoing</td>
<td>Illusion</td>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>Cosmic Conflict</td>
<td>Accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response</strong></td>
<td>Do good</td>
<td>Detachment</td>
<td>Endurance</td>
<td>Purified Faithfulness</td>
<td>Technique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resolution</strong></td>
<td>Eternal Bliss</td>
<td>Enlightenment</td>
<td>Glory and Honor</td>
<td>Triumph of the Light</td>
<td>Better Society$^8$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Secularism espouses the cultural gospel that the Apostle Paul battled against in the great city of Corinth. The Apostle Paul declared, “What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’ Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals.”$^9$ In other words, if the Christian Gospel is not true, people should just live for their own pleasure. If there is no resurrection with Christ, no salvation through the cross of suffering, then Christians are a

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$^8$ Ibid.

$^9$ I Cor 15:32-33 (ESV).
people to be pitied for the manner in which they live. However, if the Gospel is true, and if Jesus Christ God fully accomplishes salvation for us, Christians should not be deceived by the allure of a cultural gospel of pleasure. They should not give in to the temporal pleasures of eating and drinking. Instead, they should seek the glory of God and the good of people in all experiences.

Apologist Ravi Zacharias speaks to the issue of pain and pleasure in a 2014 interview about atheism, the father of secularism. Zacharias notes that, “Atheism thinks its greatest assault upon Christianity is the problem of pain, the problem of suffering. This is where they run into strong headwinds.” Zacharias goes on to explain the assertion there is evil or suffering in this world is also an assertion there is a God, a moral higher power. It is, in fact, the realization of pain and adversity that speaks to hearts about the reality of a moral God. Pain and struggle can call out to us that there is a God to be known and to cry out to Him in despair. The cultural gospel robs Christians of this struggle for understanding and meaning, and instead says there is nothing more. Ironically, the cultural gospel’s answer of pleasure leads us to the ultimate pain: There is no meaning to my life.

The second element of the cultural gospel is prosperity. If pleasure is the ultimate desire of the cultural gospel, prosperity is the ultimate method by which to achieve it. The pleasure element of the cultural gospel is directly connected to the foundational philosophies of secularism. Moreover, the prosperity element of the cultural gospel is directly connected to a distinctly American movement known as the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel movement has evolved from an obscure and impoverished religious minority, to a major movement of hugely successful and influential prosperity preachers. Time magazine wrote about the sweeping

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movement of prosperity noting, “Prosperity first blazed to public attention as the driveshaft in the moneymaking machine that was the 1980s televangelism and faded from mainstream view with the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals. But now, after some key modifications, it has not only recovered but is booming.”¹¹ The article continues by observing about the prosperity movement, “the belief has swept beyond its Pentecostal base into more buttoned-down evangelical churches, and even into congregations in the more liberal mainline. It is taught in hundreds of non-Pentecostal Bible studies.”¹²

Kate Bowler, in her work on the American prosperity movement entitled Blessed, asks the leading question, “How have millions of American Christians come to measure spiritual progress in terms of their financial status and physical well-being?”¹³ The answer is through the incredible spread of the prosperity gospel, defined as faith, wealth, health, victory in the United States. Moreover, through the medium of mass media (television, books, twitter, website, Facebook) prosperity preachers have reached an audience far greater than those who sit in their pews on a weekly basis. The new faces of Christianity are the faces of the prosperity gospel and its new kind of preacher. Bowler observes this prosperity preacher to be, “charming though not effusive, polished but not slick, these favored few could as easily have appeared on Piers Morgan Tonight as behind their megachurch Sunday pulpits. Podcasts, internet streaming, and daily television programming carried their sermons to millions.”¹⁴ Packaged with a polished look and armed with a message of success and wealth, the prosperity message is proving difficult for the Church to resist. Professor Albert Mohler writes, “The hard prosperity message


¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bowler, Blessed, book cover.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.
of the early Pentecostals has shifted to the soft prosperity message of modern preachers like Joel Olsteen.”\textsuperscript{15} Mohler references Kate Bowler’s work on this subject noting that, “The new softer version of the prosperity message has become the foremost Christian theology of modern living.”\textsuperscript{16}

In fact, the Church is being overwhelmed with the prosperity message of riches, wellness, and happiness because of faith in Jesus. In fact, Bowler states that “17% of all American Christians openly identify with the movement and over one million people attend prosperity oriented churches every Sunday.”\textsuperscript{17} The Prosperity and Wellness Gospel is no longer just a sideshow in the Church, it is a main attraction. Moreover, even Christians who do not actively attend a prosperity gospel church are being affected by the theology and mentality of the prosperity gospel. The influence of the prosperity message is wide and loud. Even for those who do now attend a prosperity Gospel church, they are listening to and adhering to the prosperity message. It is now possible to attend a church or a crusade, and be subject to a person or church’s teaching, without ever physically attending. In the quiet and comfort of our struggling congregants’ homes, they are learning that God doesn’t want them to struggle and their pain is directly proportionate to their lack of Faith. As Joel Osteen writes, in one of his many prosperity-based books, “Start calling yourself healed, happy, whole, blessed, and prosperous. Stop talking to God about how big your mountains are, and start talking to your mountains about how big your God is!”\textsuperscript{18} Again, Osteen writes to his audience, “Don’t simply settle for what your parents had. You can go further than


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Bowler, \textit{Blessed}, 6.

that. You can do more, have more, be more." These are the counterfeit prosperity messages that have confused so many evangelical Christians. They have enough biblical truth in them to get our attention, but are lacking the foundation of Christ to generate any real life transformation.

Christians Today says this about Bowler’s work on the Prosperity movement, “In effect, she argues that if a substantial number of people identify with the Prosperity Gospel and accept its common teachings, then it must be closer to the mainstream than one might imagine.” The following charts show the response of the average Christian to the most basic tenant of the prosperity movement: Does God want people to prosper?

![Chart showing responses to prosperity messages]

Figure 2.1 Wide Spread Influence of The Prosperity Gospel among Evangelicals in the U.S.

The message of prosperity is leading many Christians to believe their lives should not experience struggles if they have enough faith. In fact, according to this prosperity element of the cultural gospel, a believer’s faith can be directly calculated to the success they achieve in their

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19 Osteen, Your Best Life, 25.


21 Bowler, Blessed, 7.
lives. This prosperity message is difficult for Americans to distinguish from the classical Christian Gospel. The prosperity gospel plays into the psyche of the average American by, “inverting the well-worn American mantra that things must be seen to be believed, their gospel rewards those who believe in order to see. In their confidence that they are promised faith, wealth, health, and victory, they count themselves as blessed.”

Armed with the elements of pleasure and prosperity, the cultural gospel becomes a powerful counterfeit to the true Christian Gospel. The Church faces a powerful foe in the cultural Gospel of today. If the Church is going to effectively reach and disciple people in its current reality, it must address the falsehoods and shortcomings of the cultural gospel. In order to do so, the Church must present and model the biblical principles for walking through adversity and suffering.

The need for discipleship takes into account a hurting world and speaks to that hurting world, rather than running away from it or adapting to it. The cultural gospel fails when it is faced with adversity and pain. Those who believe there is no meaning to pain and only seek pleasure, as secularists do, are cursed to a lifetime of avoiding pain or constantly trying to fix it. Also, those who believe that God only wants them to prosper are paralyzed when faced with the constant reality of loss and trouble in this world. This is the reality that people face on a daily basis.

The Church must teach people the true Gospel that perfectly addresses both their desire for pleasure and prosperity through the cross of Christ. Max Scheler reminds us that, “The Christian doctrine of suffering asks for more than a patient tolerance of suffering...The pain and suffering of life fix our spiritual vision on the central, spiritual goods of...the redemption of

Christ.”23 The Church has the answer to the suffering and pain of the world, therefore, it must effectively and practically engage people through their personal sufferings and pain. George McDonald said, “Everything difficult indicates something more than our theory of life yet embraces.”24 People should be met in their difficulty and encouraged to find meaning in their struggle. A relationship with Christ is our ultimate reward for admitting our own brokenness and need for a savior. As Keller reminds us about the true Gospel, “Christianity sees things differently. While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life’s joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world’s sorrows, tasting the coming joy.”25

**Prevailing Local Church Paradigms and Perspectives**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”26 Almost every local church in America has some sort of discipleship program or ministry, however, many do not have a philosophy or vision of what discipleship is. One of the issues the church currently has with discipling people effectively is they do not have a clear picture of what they are trying to accomplish. Many churches have discipleship ministries, but few churches are full of disciples. Effective church discipleship is comprised of knowing what the task of discipleship is, to make “complete and competent followers of Jesus Christ.”27 Moreover, having a clear understanding of how it can be effectively accomplished. This project’s premise is that in order to effectively make complete and competent followers of Jesus, one must

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be able to connect the growth principles of the Bible to the life issues of the person. As pastor John Ortberg has noted, “The truth is that the term spiritual life is simply a way of referring to one’s life – every moment and facet of it – from God’s perspective. Another was of saying it is this: God is not interested in your spiritual life. God is just interested in your life. He intends to redeem it.”28

The ability to connect the eternal truths of the Scriptures with the temporal problems of life makes these discipleship models relevant and engaging. In fact, many churches are currently attempting to engage people where they are with the true Gospel message of grace and transformation. Discipleship is a process, and, also a partnership: A partnership between God, the disciple, and those who are actively discipling them (the local church). All three of these partnering elements must be present in order for discipleship to be most effective. The churches that are currently accomplishing effective discipleship have found methods and models to bring together these partners in a transformative manner. These churches have presented discipleship to people in a way that leads them towards a more complete life in Christ, not just further church involvement. After all, as George Barna observes, “Discipleship is not a program. It is not a ministry. It is a lifelong commitment to a lifestyle.”29

The life-changing message of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ provides hope for transformation in the places of hurt and adversity. It is important for Churches to reach people struggling through the daily life issues. Ultimately, discipleship can transform every area of a person’s life. Ortberg adds, “The possibility of transformation is the essence of hope.


29 Barna, Growing True Disciples, 21.
Psychologist Aaron Beck says the single belief most toxic to a relationship is the belief that the other person cannot change.\(^{30}\) The hope that each of us has is the possibility of change, the ability for life transformation in Christ.

There are currently many discipleship ministries helping believers grow their faith through adversity and life issues. It is of great importance and value to know and understand how current discipleship structures are accomplishing this difficult task. In their own distinct manner; all five of these current discipleship paradigms are influencing the thinking, and behavior of discipleship in churches today. To accomplish the goal of this thesis project, the Church must know and understand these current discipleship paradigms.

There are five effective local church discipleship models, listed in Barna’s *Growing True Disciples*, “Five models that have great potential to produce zealots for Christ – people who get it and who live it.”\(^{31}\) These models have been considered by many to be leading examples of what it looks like for a church to accomplish discipleship well in today’s reality. For the purposes of this project, it is important to observe how the local church is currently accomplishing effective discipleship. Each of the subsequent discipleship paradigms have been lauded for their effectiveness and used as an example for other churches when building their own discipleship principles and structures.

The first current paradigm of effective discipleship is the *Competencies Model*.\(^{32}\) This model is from the Pantego Bible Church and is based on an individual disciple’s beliefs, practices, and virtues. Here are the specific competences that encompass this discipleship table:

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\(^{32}\) Ibid.
Table 2.2. The Pantego Bible Church – Competencies Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Virtues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Trinity</td>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>Joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation by Grace</td>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>Peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority of the Bible</td>
<td>Single-Mindedness</td>
<td>Faithfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal God</td>
<td>Bible Study</td>
<td>Self-Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity in Christ</td>
<td>Total Commitment</td>
<td>Humility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>Biblical Community</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanity</td>
<td>Give Away Your Time</td>
<td>Patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Give Away Your Money</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternity</td>
<td>Give Away Your Faith</td>
<td>Kindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Give Away Your Life</td>
<td>Gentleness$^{33}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Integration is a key component of this current discipleship model. As Barna and his team point out, “this model is a highly integrated approach to discipleship that stands out for its emphasis upon personal assessment and integration with all aspects of ministry. The model is based on the great commandment and great commission and is broken into 30 specific foci.”$^{34}$ The author was able to attend several trainings for this current model, and also implemented a hybrid of this model at his former church. This discipleship paradigm is very thoughtful and engages people in both personal belief and practice.

Another current discipleship paradigm is the *Missional Model*.$^{35}$ Robert Lewis and his team at Fellowship Bible Church Little Rock, in Arkansas developed this discipleship model.

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$^{34}$ Ibid.

$^{35}$ Ibid., 111.
This paradigm is geared towards helping people achieve the mission of the local church. Each person in the church is called to participate in the mission of that particular local church, but also to participate in the global mission of the Church. Author Bob Roberts writes about local churches that possess a global calling, he observes, “The kingdom of God is a radical message meant to be lived out in radical lives, which then historically and culturally have radical results.” When discipleship is being effectively accomplished in the lives of people in a local church, the local community will be changed as well. Roberts adds, “If people aren’t truly transformed because of all we are doing, nothing in our communities, our country, and our world will be transformed. Do we best see the measure of transformation primarily in the pew or in the community? The question isn’t should churches grow, but why should they grow?” Effective discipleship can change the world of the person and the community, especially one that is hurting.

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37 Ibid., 22-23.
Table 2.3. The Six Core Competences of the Missional Model

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Being passionately committed to Jesus Christ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Evaluating everything in their life according to biblical standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Being deeply committed to having a healthy family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Being morally pure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Being evangelistically bold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Being socially responsible and impactful.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Members of FBCLR are required to be in a small group that meets every other week and incorporates the core competences of the Missional Model of discipleship. This current discipleship model requires a great deal of personal responsibility. Once a participant has been introduced to the missional core competencies and is connected to a small group, the participant is responsible for their personal growth.

The next leading discipleship model, as listed in Growing True Disciples, is the Neighborhood Paradigm. The Neighborhood model was developed at Perimeter Church in Atlanta, Georgia. This local church is spread out across the perimeter of the greater Atlanta metropolitan area, making small groups of higher importance and value. At Perimeter Church, those who are interested in being members join a neighborhood congregation. These congregations are spread out across the city to accommodate a sprawling metro area that covers

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38 Barna, Growing True Disciples, 111.
39 Ibid., 114.
many square miles. As the groups meet they focus on certain aspects of worship, teaching, and fellowship. This discipleship paradigm is set up to allow the members of the neighborhood congregation to invite people once a month for a fellowship event and the next meeting is focused on a particular teaching. The groups are meeting every other week with one meeting focused on outreach and the other meeting focused on teaching. The leaders of the neighborhood congregations enter into a yearlong training program and receive continual education and guidance as they lead others in the group. Barna points out, “The neighborhood congregation is the church’s primary delivery point for spiritual nurture and care. It is also the main launching pad for casting vision for outreach opportunities.”40

The members of Perimeter Church, participants in the Neighborhood paradigm, are also encouraged to join a discipleship team. “Each discipler will lead 5 to 9 individual, of the same gender, through the developmental process.”41 The participants are also led through a church discipleship curriculum that walks them through a more academic model of learning over the course of three years.

Chase Oaks Church, in Plano Texas, incorporates a discipleship paradigm known as the Worldview Model.42 The primary focus of the Worldview Model is the, “impartation of biblical wisdom that leads to personal transformation. This model is designed to increase people’s participation in the church, upgrade their level of service to other people, and to improve their ability to understand issues and to make decisions from a biblical perspective.”43 This model also uses the structure of geographically based groups for its primary delivery of discipleship. The

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40 Barna, Growing True Disciples, 115.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 117
43 Ibid.
premise of this Worldview paradigm is found in what Ortberg writes about having a biblical view of the world, and one’s self. “Living in God’s love requires new eyes. We must learn to continually see God’s grace at work all around us.”

The participants in these geographically based group (mini-churches) are encouraged to use a two-year curriculum known as Discovery. The Discovery curriculum takes participants on a journey through foundational Christian doctrine and practice in their realities. Discovery Learning Process asks the people participating to wrestle with six key steps in thinking biblically. The following chart explains each of these steps.

Table 2.4. The Discovery Learning Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step One → Grasp the Issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step Two → Study the Scriptures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Three → Consult Other Sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Four → Form a Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Five → Discuss the Issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step Six → Take Steps to Obey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final current discipleship paradigm to understand is known as the Lecture-Lab model. This discipleship model is currently being employed at North Coast Church in San Diego. “This model focuses upon delivering content through sermons and using small groups as

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44 John Ortberg, Love Beyond Reason (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 33.
45 Jeff Jones and Bruce Miller, Discovering the Christian Life (Richardson, TX: Center for Church Based Training, 2002).
46 Ibid., iii.
47 Barna, Growing True Disciples, 119.
the means of exploring the content further to conceive of, and follow through on, applications.\textsuperscript{48} The idea with this model is that a participant is able to hear a sermon in a large group setting, and then process it in a small group setting quickly thereafter. The desire is people will gain knowledge that grows their faith in the lecture, and then develop relationships that lead to Christian character and service in the groups.

Sermons at North Coast church are expository in nature and are typically arranged in a manner that allows the labs or groups to discuss their background and applications. This model requires the sermons and teachings be Scripture based. Following every sermon, a handout and homework are given to the participants of this model. These handouts are taken to the labs for further discussion and prayer. Leaders are trained to lead these labs for ten weeks or more and then turn in reports on how the group is doing. At that point, participants may take a break from the group or re-join that lab or another one being offered at the church. This \textit{Lecture-Lab} model is admittedly looser than any of the other leading discipleship paradigms and thus offers flexibility with structure to the church and participants. However, these paradigms, as well as the other leading discipleship paradigms, all utilize the power of small community. As author Peter Block remarks, “The key to creating transforming community, then, is to see the power in the small.” \textsuperscript{49}

It is important to understand some of the prevailing church discipleship models of today; examining what is working in the great task of conforming people into the image of God. Elmer Towns, Ed Stetzer, and Warren Bird have authored a book together about the current innovations of the local church. In their work the authors argue that, “Suppose you were a first-time missionary sent to an unreached people group. You would no doubt ask, ‘What can I learn from

\textsuperscript{48} Barna, \textit{Growing True Disciples}, 119.

\textsuperscript{49} Peter Block, \textit{Community: The Structure of Belonging} (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers),10.
other missionaries pioneering in similar areas, especially missionaries that have worked with groups who have responded positively to the gospel?" The thought behind the examination of these current discipleship paradigms and models is to understand what works. Towns, Stetzer, and Bird continue by stating, “the more we can identify the most influential heartbeat behind other churches, the more intentional we can be in asking if this is the direction God is trying to take us.”

Additional research has been conducted on the current discipleship reality and leadership perspectives of current local church ministry leaders. A survey collecting data from over 50 ministry leaders was conducted within the context of a local church. All of the leaders surveyed are currently discipling people in the local church context. Those surveyed represent various denominational backgrounds and various local church ministry experiences and roles. These various backgrounds and roles include to role of elders, staff members, pastors, community group leaders, and high-capacity volunteers. All of the individuals who participated in the survey are currently discipling other people within the context of the local church. In age, stage of life, denominational heritage, leadership experience, and length of personal faith journey the leaders surveyed come from a wide range of experiences.

The data was collected from questionnaire surveys that evaluated the experiences of the leader, their personal perspectives on discipling people through adversity, their understanding of the Scriptures, and their attitudes about being better equipped and helped by the local church. From this research, further insight is gained into the individual perspectives of leaders on the subjects of discipleship, training and equipping, and support from the local church. The leaders

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51 Towns, Stetzer and Bird, *11 Innovations of the Local Church*, 11.
surveyed have much variety in their local church backgrounds. The findings from the survey are listed in the table below. (To view the full thesis project survey, see Appendix A.)

**Current Leadership and Discipleship Realities**

1. As a Christian, do you believe God allows us to struggle?

![Survey results for question 1](image)

2. As a Christian, which one best describes your view of personal adversity?

![Survey results for question 2](image)
3  How has personal struggle shaped your faith?

4  Do you believe your current circumstances equate to your personal faith?

5  Have you ever heard of the prosperity gospel?
6. If yes, where did you hear about it?

[Bar chart showing the distribution of where respondents heard about it, with the categories listed as Television, Books and Magazines, Social Media, From other Christians, At Church, and Not applicable.]

7. As a leader and disciple, how long have you been in a discipleship position with others?

[Bar chart showing the distribution of how long respondents have been in a discipleship position, with categories for 1 year or less, 1-3 years, 3-7 years, and 7+ years.]

8. How often do people talk with you, or with your group, about personal struggle?

[Bar chart showing the distribution of how often respondents talk about personal struggles, with categories for Never, Rarely, Often, and Every conversation or group setting.]
9  Do you encourage conversations about personal adversity and difficulties?

10  Do you see adversity as an opportunity to disciple people at a deeper level?

11  Could you point people to specific Bible passages or principles about how to handle adversity?
12 Do you feel overwhelmed by the problems people bring up?

13 How equipped are you to help those you lead and disciple through their life struggles?

14 If you could be further equipped by your church to help others, would you be interested?
15 Do you think you create a discipleship environment that encourages people to share their difficulties?

Yes, I encourage people to open up about their personal struggles
I’m not really sure
No, it makes me uncomfortable

16 Would the people you lead agree with this statement? God’s #1 desire is for us to be successful.

Yes, they would agree with that statement
No, they would disagree with that statement
I’m not sure how they would answer

Figure 2.2. Research Survey Percentages
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highlighted Results from Survey Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>64% of the church leaders have been a Christian more than 20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98% of the church leaders believe God allows us to struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98% of survey respondents understand it’s a part of life and see meaning in it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95% believe their faith has deepened because of adversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29% believe their circumstances equate to their personal faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78% have heard of the prosperity gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52% have been discipling people more than 7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75% say that people they are discipling talk about their struggles often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80% of group leaders say they encourage people to talk about their struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91% say they see adversity as an opportunity to disciple people at a deeper level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45% say they can point to specific Bible verses about how to handle adversity; 43% say they can only point to a few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79% say they are sometimes overwhelmed by the problems people bring up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61% of church leaders believe they are equipped to lead and disciple people through their struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72% of church leaders would be interested in being further equipped to help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79% of church leaders believe they create a discipleship environment that encourages people to share their difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31% are not sure how the people they disciple would answer the question asking if God’s #1 desire for us is to be successful; 15% believe they would answer yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32% believe the Church has the biggest cultural impact on the people they disciple</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3
THE FIVE BIBLICAL KEYS FOR DISCIPLESHIP THROUGH ADVERSITY

The Need for Biblically Principled Discipleship

This thesis project is meant to help the local church connect sound biblical principles with the hurting people of their congregations. Many Christians have a distorted view of how adversity and discipleship, this has been perpetuated by a pervasive cultural gospel of pleasure and prosperity. Moreover, the survey results of this thesis project show a gap between the reality of personal struggle and the lack of biblical knowledge to properly disciple people through them. For example, 75% of leaders surveyed stated that people often share their personal hardships, however; only 45% of those leaders possessed the knowledge to point those struggling people to sound biblical principles for growth. It is the assertion of the author that effective discipleship is accomplished best in the context of personal adversity in struggle. The research conducted for this thesis project revealed that, 95% of leaders believe adversity has helped them grow their faith, and over 91% of leaders say struggle is an opportunity for them to better disciple others. There is a great need for local church leaders to better understand the biblical principles for growing faith through adversity. The remaining work of this project is dedicated to presenting the principles and applications for bridging this discipleship gap in the local church. Larry Crabb argues that, “The core purpose of the church is the spiritual formation of its members, to produce ‘little Christs’ who can reflect the Father’s heart, release the Spirit’s life from their souls into others, and advance Christ’s mission in the world.”\(^1\)

\(^1\) Larry Crabb, Inside Out (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress) 34.
The type of struggle that grows our faith is a struggle that happens according to the will of God. As the apostle Peter writes, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”² In order for this type of faith growth to take place, the leaders of the Church and individual disciples must wholly rely on the foundational discipleship principles outlined in the Scriptures. The Bible equips the Church with several key principles for engaging all people with the Gospel, especially those who are disillusioned and hurting. In fact, biblical steps for faith growth are often presented within this struggle framework. Much like the building of muscle requires resistance and intensity; building a strong faith requires intense resistance. Most people are not encouraged about the process of building physical strength. However, they appreciate and enjoy the results of the process through renewed physical ability and wellbeing. The biblical steps for building faith are the process by which people can engage in the necessary resistances in order for faith growth.

In one of the most succinct definitions of biblical faith, the writer of Hebrews reminds us, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”³ The essence of biblical faith then is hope; hope for something or someone altogether different and better than what is being currently being experienced or seen by the individual. It stands to reason the key principles working to grow a person’s faith are best discovered and lived out in the context of their own longing. This is what the Christian Gospel has to offer to the world; the great hope there is more to life than prosperity and pleasure. The Gospel, based on biblical principles, a person can actually know God and grow in God through their longings and trials. Robert McGee observes, “A sense of need usually propels us to look for an alternative. We may have the

² 1 Pet 4:12-13 (ESV).
³ Heb 11:1 (ESV).
courage to change but may be unsure how and where to start.”⁴ This needy and confusing space is where the work of the church can best happen. If the discipling leaders of a local church understand their people’s current realities and also the essential and timeless biblical principles for discipleship, something miraculous can take place, changed lives.

These biblical steps for growing faith in and through the context of struggle are to be applied by the Church to people. It’s in the context of discipling relationships that these biblical principles are able to be conveyed with the great skill and care required. Therefore, the Church must know these essential biblical principles and be convinced it is their role to share and apply them with people. If the role of the Church is to “go and make disciples of all nations,”⁵ it must know the biblical principles of how to do so. It is the premise of this thesis project that the Church is well informed about its role in the world. However, the Church is not currently well equipped to perform its God-ordained role. The hope of this thesis project is to participate in the equipping of the Church and its leaders for the role of discipleship within the context of our current realities. The current reality is one of much despair and suffering. Of course, suffering existed since the fall of humanity. However, the Church and the Christian Gospel are now under attack from pleasure and prosperity philosophies that undermine the very essence of what it means to walk with Christ through the valley of the shadow of death. The current reality of these influences is turning the Gospel and its’ principles into self-focused and self-determined ideas, not the unique life transforming work of grace through Jesus Christ. Crabb notes that, “Modern Christianity, in a dramatic reversal of its biblical form, promises to relieve the pain of living in a fallen world.”⁶

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⁵ Matt 28:19a (ESV).
In a recent survey conducted by the Barna group, Christians and non-Christians alike are now questioning some of the most basic and essential biblical principles as truth. It is interesting to see the narrow gap between what Christians and non-Christians believe about how God aids us in our helpless condition. George Barna observed in the survey results that, “The spiritual beliefs of Christians are continuing to stray from biblical teaching. Among the specific beliefs alluded to in the book are the majorities who believe that the Bible teaches, ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ 68% of born-again Christians agree with this statement, and 75% of Americans at large.”

![Diagram showing 68% of born again Christians believe the Bible teaches, “God helps those who help themselves,” and 75% of Americans at large believe it.](image)

Figure 3.1. What Christians and Non-Christians Believe

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8 Ibid.
This research gives credence to the reality that a majority of Christians do not have an understanding of key biblical principles for living and for discipleship. Moreover, Talbot Seminary conducted a survey about this idea of people helping themselves in struggle. According to Talbot, about 80% think, ‘God helps those who help themselves’ is an actual Bible verse."

Christianity knows nothing of such ideas. The Christian Gospel helps us to understand the principles of salvation and discipleship from beginning to end. The Bible teaches, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

This biblical principle, and the other essential discipleship principles given to us through the Bible must be understood and applied in the Church.

The word principle is defined as, “A comprehensive and fundamental law, doctrine, or assumption; a rule or a code of conduct.” Principles are meant to guide us and to provide clear guidelines for living, especially in times of uncertainty and doubt. Biblical principles are meant to be guardrails to protect us from the cliffs of deception and self-indulgence. God, through the Bible, has given us a wonderful gift of insight and understanding. The Bible clearly defines the principles needed to not just survive this difficult world, but to thrive and grow greatly in faith. Jesus cautioned and encouraged his disciples to stay connected to Him as they journeyed through this world. Jesus said to them, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” The principles shared in this chapter are written to help the Church stay connected to the guiding and guarding

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10 Eph 2:8 (ESV).


12 John 15:5 (ESV).
principles of the Scriptures. It is through these biblical principles people can grow in our faith, knowing God more and doing His will more effectively.

Five Key Biblical Principles for Growth

For the purposes of this thesis project, the author is presenting five biblical keys, or principles, for growing faith through personal adversity. In the author’s view, these five biblical principles represent the essential God-ordained and demonstrated steps for local church leaders to better disciple their people through adversity. These keys are learned and practiced in the context of an intimate relationship with God. Moreover, these keys are not to be followed in a sequence order, but rather as a combination of steps in God’s grace and truth as Christians journey through this troubled world. The five biblical keys are perspective, perseverance, power, peace, and platform. God wants His people to have these five biblical steps, these five codes of conduct and rule deep within their hearts. God wants His people to share these principles with others as they disciple them in his truth. Each of these key principles represents steps in growing our faith through adversity.

Key 1 - Perspective

The word perspective is defined as, “one’s point of view.”

When one is going through adversity, the lenses by which they look through at what they are presently going through are crucial. The Bible offers us a different manner of viewing our reality. The apostle Paul was particularly apt in his ability to keep a biblical perspective on his current reality of pain. Paul wrote to the church at

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Rome, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”\textsuperscript{14}

In this passage, Paul is able to look through the lens of eternity while journeying through his temporal anguish. According to the apostle Paul, the gift of biblical perspective is two distinct understandings. The apostle Paul is not living in denial about his present sufferings. Reading about the truth of biblical perspective from Paul is not just positive thinking or a lack of being in touch with reality. Paul is well aware of the sufferings of his present time and the extreme price he paid for serving Christ in a broken world. Listen to his earlier words, in II Corinthians 11:23-31, to the church at Corinth about his personal struggles,

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman— with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.\textsuperscript{15}

Many people live with a temporal perspective that only allows them to see and feel their pain through the understanding of this present world. Many people within our churches live in complete denial and repression about their past or present trials. They cannot bear to talk about the miseries or tragedies that have befallen them or a loved one. As one observes, even those in our Churches, turn to pleasures or anesthetize to distance themselves from their present sufferings. Larry Crabb

\textsuperscript{14} Rom 8:18 (ESV).
\textsuperscript{15} II Cor 11:23-31 (ESV).
described modern Christianity as a, “Vending-machine Christianity: Insert a dollar of ethical living and out comes a thousand dollars of personal well-being in an improved world.”

The modern context is a challenge for the local church to disciple people in. Leaders must be able to see the absolute destruction this manner of repression and denial is having on congregants. Oftentimes, it is the inability of a leader to present a biblical and eternal perspective. As Henry Cloud writes, “There is therapeutic suffering, and there is destructive suffering at the hands of evil people. The key is to be able to tell the difference between the two and to apply the right kind of experience to each.”

Biblical perspective allows us to frame our current realities within the context of our eternal glory. The apostle Paul is well aware of his current and past sufferings for Christ. He is able to write freely and expressively about the many hardships of his current condition. He wants his disciples in Rome, Corinth, Philippi, and cities all over the world to have a biblical perspective on their present sufferings. Paul desires to make this clear to the Church. If the first understanding that Paul gives through biblical perspective is of our current sufferings, the second understanding is of our eternal glory with Christ.

Paul teaches and disciples others by writing that God actually gives us victory through our human weaknesses and adversities. He says, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” This is such a counter-cultural statement to the church at Corinth and to us today. Only through God can weaknesses be seen as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of heaven. When Christians are able to compare the present with future, they should rejoice. Paul gives a new vantage point about suffering. He writes that the Church should compare its current trials with its future glory, and this should fill us with hope. Paul reminds a

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17 Cloud and Townsend, How People Grow, 207.
18 II Cor 11:30 (ESV).
hurting people, “For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

Patience is the by-product of biblical perspective. There is a type of comparing that should give hope, it is found in the future and not in the past or present. Being patient in difficulties is looking ahead to the reward and glory with Jesus Christ. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit, not of the flesh. When present realities do not match up with longings and desires, it is the Spirit of God that allows people to patiently endure what God has prepared for them. “The ultimate glory that Christians will receive is so stupendous that the sufferings of this present time are insignificant in comparison. They look forward both to the resurrection of the body and to the new heaven and new earth.”

Most of the people discipled are comparing their present sufferings with a cultural standard of pleasure and prosperity. Biblical perspective allows followers to have the lens of truth. One of the greatest gifts a church leader can give to their disciples is the gift of perspective. Biblical perspective causes us to see the world like the apostle Paul. Paul was able to use the harshness of his present sufferings to reveal the splendor of his future glory with Christ. The darker the present circumstances became, the brighter the hope of glory shined. (See survey results) Many of them are confused and frustrated with the perceived shortcomings of their own faith. In addition, people in our churches are frustrated with their leaders and with other Christians that they wrongly blame others for their own misperceptions. Since people must be given the proper perspective to see their life through, biblical perspective is the most generous gift given to people that are discipled. It is because of Christ, revealed in and through the Scriptures, which followers are able to clearly share the truth of our present time and the glory to come.

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19 Rom 8:24-25 (ESV).

20 Thomas Schreiner, *ESV Study Bible*, 2171.
The principles of biblical discipleship are seen through the many narratives of men and women who consistently persevered through unthinkable trials. The biblical principle of perspective causes us to rejoice because of the future glory Christians are one day to obtain through Christ. However, they are not left by Christ in their present situations to only hope for a future redemption. “The people of God rejoice not only in future glory but in present trials and sufferings, not because trials are pleasant but because they produce a step-by-step transformation that makes believers more like Christ.”21 They were able to persevere because of the hope their faith was producing in them. The apostle Paul describes this faith growing process, in the context of personal adversity, to the Church when he writes Romans 5:1-5,

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.22

Perseverance is the first step given in this passage of describing a person who suffers well through this life. Note also that Paul is writing about this process of biblical growth to the entire church at Rome. The people in our churches need community with one another in order to be able to grow in their faith. Paul uses the pronoun us, to describe who is on this step-by-step discipleship journey. More than another program offered through the Church, people need other people in the Church. Community reveals a picture of what their present sufferings are

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21 Thomas Schreiner, *ESV Study Bible*, 2165.
22 Rom 5:1-5 (ESV).
producing. Christians need other people to help them persevere and live a principle-based life. Discipleship happens best in a biblical community that perseveres.

The Bible pushes us to community with other believers. People are meant to share struggle with others. Examples of this type of common perseverance are seen everyday in military units, sports teams, workplaces, and families. Oftentimes, people go farther and faster within the context of a group than they ever would as an individual. Suffering calls us to a deep fellowship with Christ and with one another, and this only happens when Christians persevere together. Biblical principles are most often written to the entire community, not to just to the individual. Individualism, particularly the current variety, robs people of the communal synergy resulting from perseverance. The Church is the optimal place to grow our faith through adversity.

The apostle James wants to make sure that the entire Church is aware of how to handle their trials well. James writes about the power of perseverance to the church he pastored in Jerusalem, and to all the “tribes in Dispersion.” James is writing to the entire Christian community, even to those who have been scattered around the world by persecution. James writes, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith, produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”\(^{23}\) Shortcuts keep us from fully growing our faith. Shortcuts such as quitting, moving, cheating, changing, and skipping can become enemies of perseverance.

According to James, perseverance is the foundational biblical principle for growing our faith. James writes there is one prevailing event that causes us to develop perseverance, or testing of our faith. This is the only reason why Christians can count it all joy when they meet trials of

\(^{23}\) Jas 1:2-4 (ESV).
various kinds, because they know that something valuable is being produced. When leaders
disciple people with this biblical truth, people can begin to see the necessity of adversity for the
growing of their faith.

Through the principle of perseverance, the Church can together begin to see the grace of
God in the experience of our trials. Our trials of various kinds are the key to discipling us into the
men and woman God has designed us to be. As Andy Stanley remarked, “The grace of God has
no load limits.”24 The weight of struggle can never outweigh the weight of God’s grace. The more
someone perseveres through adversity, the Church of Jesus Christ is more complete. “Not that I
have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ
Jesus has made me his own.”25 This is our simple prayer of perseverance through adversity.

Key 3 - Power

Power can be defined as, “a source or means of supplying energy.”26 Dynamis is the
Greek word Jesus uses to describe the type of power that the person of the Holy Spirit will give
to His disciples. The Holy Spirit is a dynamite source of power within Christians. This source of
power is supplied best when our own power is weak. Jesus prepares his disciples for his earthly
departure, he gives this reassurance to them: “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to
you.”27 The disciples know supremely they will not be abandoned to the darkness of this world.
They will not have to defend themselves against the evil forces and powers of this world. The
disciples are told that Jesus will come to meet them. Jesus will be their source of energy and
strength. Christians are not to be concerned with figuring out how to get to Jesus in the midst of

25 Phil 3:12 (ESV).
27 John 14:18 (ESV).
our journey through this world. Jesus will come and meet them in the places of their greatest need. God will not leave them to themselves; God will work to get to where they need Him most.

People desire to have power over their circumstances and relationships. The author’s temptation, when faced with difficulty of various kinds, is to attempt to grab control of the concerning situation. A relationship that is painfully falling apart, a business deal gone bad, a dream that does not come to pass. The old adage, “might makes right” is applied to many adverse situations. However, this is not the way of Jesus. Jesus tells his disciples that his power and presence will come to them in their trials. There is a biblical irony at play here; the more Christians attempt to take power, the less they have from Jesus. The author of Hebrews harkens God’s words to Joshua and the community of Israel as he writes, “Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we can confidently say, The Lord is my helper’ I will not fear; what can man do to me?”

The Church must disciple its people with this great key to God’s power at work within them. The current cultural reality is teaching people to grab power and money as the answer to their pain. The cultural gospel of prosperity and pleasure has distorted where true power is found. Sadly, the Church has a history of misplacing its trust and hope in the wrong power sources. A story from the twelfth century that D. M. Lloyd-Jones writes about captures this history. Lloyd-Jones recalls,

There is a story of one of the popes of Rome in the twelfth century showing Thomas Aquinas around St. Peter’s and the Vatican. As they walked around, the Pope pointed to the gold and the silver, the ornate buildings, and the magnificence of it all and said, ‘You see Thomas, the church can no longer say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’ ‘I do see,” said Thomas, ‘but I see something further, She also cannot say, ‘Rise up and walk.’”

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28 Heb 13:5-6 (ESV).
This story highlights one of the great sins of the Church; Christians are changed by the world far more than they are changing the world. It is precisely in our difficulty that the truth of who they believe and what they believe about Him shines brightest. Jesus said, in his final conversation with the disciples, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses...” The power of Christ is given to us in order to be witnesses to this broken world. Peter and John possessed a trust in the authority of Jesus Christ. Moreover, this trust allowed them access to the power of the name of Christ. This is a far greater gift and possession than what the world has to offer us in our hour of need.

Biblical discipleship is based on the principle of strength through humility. This principle is counterintuitive for how most of our congregants experience their workplace, home, and sometimes their own church. Most often, their experiences lead them to believe it is through strength and control they can avoid humiliation. Therefore, discipleship based on this principle of God’s power at work in us is all the more challenging and paramount.

The sharing of Christ’s sufferings in the world grants us access to the power of Christ’s eternal glory and power. The apostle Paul, in his discipleship writings to the church at Philippi, beautifully illustrates this discipleship principle of personally experiencing the power of Christ through personal loss. Paul writes in Philippians 3:7-10,

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that come from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.  

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30 Acts 1:8a (ESV).
31 Phil 3:7-10 (ESV).
When Christians are able to say no to the powers of this world, namely money and control, they are able to take hold of the resurrection power that has taken hold of them.

God wants us to disciple people in the truth of His power that comes to us in the testing and trials of our faith. As Pastor Tullian Tchividjian writes, “The house of religious cards ‘that glory built’ collapses when we inevitably encounter unforeseen pain and suffering...in other words, to our ruin, to our knees, to the place where if we are to find an help or comfort, it must come from somewhere outside of us.”32 The loss of our power in this world; power that is dependant on our position, prestige, pedigree or our past, releases us to deeply experience the power of Christ’s resurrection. The power that Christ gives to us is not from this world, therefore, it must come from outside of us. The dynamite power of God is a gift of the Holy Spirit and is manifested most through personal adversity. “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”33

Key 4 - Peace

A life with Christ offers us the peace that is being sought by every man, woman, and child that walks the face of the earth. Jesus reminded his disciples about true peace in John 16:33, “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”34 If Christians search for peace in this world, Jesus taught that they would be found wanting and restless. Saint Augustine in his Confessions famously wrote, “You have made us for yourself, Oh Lord, and our heart is restless

33 Rom 1:16a (ESV).
34 John 16:33 (ESV).
until it rests in you.” Christians all have shape inside of us that is made to fit with the presence of God in our lives. In actuality it is a curse to journey through the experiences of life with no sense of peace. God curses Cain, after the he murder of his brother Abel, saying to Cain, “When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” Restlessness is a curse far worse than even death itself. In this world of tribulations, Christians long for the Shalom of God in our lives. In churches, there are those who would secretly choose death over their present experience of restless pain.

God desires to fill all restless souls with his peaceful presence; but Christians must remove all other substitutes to make a way for Him. It is most often through tribulations that our great need for comfort and rest is revealed. When a needed soul commodity, peace, is removed from daily experience, they look to fill the emptiness by any means necessary. As Keller notes, “The Bible’s answer is that the human heart is an idol factory...God was saying that the human heart takes good things like successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things.” Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “There are more idols in the world than there are realities.” Christians take the good things of their lives, the general blessings of God, and make them into the supreme thing of life. This is the essence of the cultural gospel that is so prevalent among followers of Christ.

Christians are more concerned with maintaining the idols currently in their hands than seeking the eternal peace that Christ offers through His presence. In this unrelenting quest to fill the devoid spaces of souls, they often leave the principles of biblical discipleship for others to be

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35 Augustine, Confessions (Lib 1,1-2,2,5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5).
36 Gen 4:12 (ESV).
concerned with. Moreover, the idols that people hold in their hearts shape who they are. Church leaders can see the effect the idols of money, sex, and power have had on the American culture, the absolute destruction of morality and principled living. Idols are hard to give up. People identify with our idols of choice. G. K. Beale wrote, “People resemble what they revere...God has made all people to reflect, to be imaging beings. People will always reflect something, whether it be God’s character or some feature of the world.”

Leaders, must understand what their congregants truly worship is what they will authentically reflect. People might be able to mask their idolatry for a season, or a Sunday, but eventually what is being worshiped will be revealed. When people are in situations that seem out of control or prolonged in discomfort they will by instinct attempt to take hold of their particular idol of choice. “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron an said to him, ‘Up, make us gods who shall go before us.” The people were quick to trade the leadership of Moses, and the one true God, for their old idols and customs. Church leaders must understand that transformative discipleship requires calling people to constantly give up their old customs and principles of this world. Followers of Christ should not be surprised in the difficulty of the task, Jesus certainly wasn’t.

Jesus promises his disciples the Helper, the Holy Spirit, to be with them and guide them in all truth. Peace is the promise of God to His people. Jesus teaches, “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let

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40 Exod 32:1-2a (ESV).
not your hearts be troubled...” Jesus teaches us a principle of peace that does not come from this world. The peace that all people are seeking after does not come through this world. The Church knows where true peace and rest come from, a relationship with Jesus Christ. This is the great prize Christianity offers the world. The Church has the answer, through Christ, for a hurting and longing world. The adverse situations of life provide the means by which the Church can best explain where our true Shalom is found. These opportunities for discipleship are found inside and outside the local church walls. As Andreas Kostenberger writes, “The expression peace (Hb. Shalom) had a much richer connotation than the English word does since it conveyed not merely the absence of conflict and turmoil but also the notion of positive blessing, especially in terms of right relationship with God.” Jesus wants us to have His peace, not the peace that is idolized from this world.

A song often has the power to express and comfort pain when words alone feel empty. Marshall Segal remarked that, “God has given us a merciful gift in music authored in the midst of great tragedy. Again and again, “It Is Well” has met and carried saints through the worst kinds of suffering, reminding us of the deep, abiding, sovereign Well at the bottom of our joy and life.” In the midst of unimaginable adversity, Horatio Spafford begins his masterful declaration with these timeless words, “When peace like a river attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul!” As another musician once penned, “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.”

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41 John 14:26-27a (ESV).
42 Andreas Kostenberger, ESV Study Bible, p. 2053.
45 Ps 4:8 (ESV).
Through Christ alone, peace can attend my way in sorrow and allow me to dwell in safety. Peace in suffering is a learned principle, “Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul!” And, as David wrote, “for you alone, O Lord, make me...” The peace that passes all understanding is not of this world. This kind of peace is one of the key principles to discipleship in the context of this broken world. The peace within the depths of my soul cannot be touched with the circumstances or idols of this world. This is a discipleship principle that our churches and world are desperately searching for.

Key 5 - Platform

Understood and handled correctly, pain can become a platform for God’s grace. The seasons of great struggle in life, by the transformative work of God, can become the platform for a great God. Saint Peter instructed followers of Jesus they should not be surprised when they suffer and to use their sufferings to bring honor to Jesus. He wrote, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.”46 This key biblical principle of discipleship through adversity, platform, takes us from a vertical focus to a horizontal focus. Whereas the first four discipleship principles are more focused on one’s individual relationship with God, the platform principle is focused on the relationships surrounding us. The work of God in our own hearts is should lead us to seek His work in the hearts of others.

There is an indelible connection between our relationship with God and with mankind. Life with God is meant to be lived with the Godly. Jesus understood this, He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul with all your mind and with all your strength, The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”47 Loving God and loving people are

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46 I Pet 4:16 (ESV).
47 Mark 12:30-31a (ESV).
the two movements that God is most concerned with in our lives. Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich wrote that, “Living horizontally means becoming aware that God’s purpose for our inner lives is lived our in the world, whether for ‘the many’ (larger causes) of for ‘the one’ (serving one or two people).” In order for faith to grow through adversity, one must have an outlook that includes a benefit for others because of our pain.

It is God’s desire to comfort us in all of our afflictions. The apostle Paul writes about the principle of platform in this way,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will share in our comfort.

Through the afflictions of this world Christians become intimately aware of the great grace given by Christ alone. Through the personal journey of struggle, a God story occurs to be shared with others. It is through our weaknesses and humility that an authentic platform is developed to share the unchanging principles of God with others. Scott Hafemann remarks, “One of God’s purposes in the suffering of Christians is that they would experience direct, personal comfort from God, and then from that experience be able to minister God’s comfort to others.”

Struggle becomes our greatest platform to share the greatest grace with others. The author entered into local church ministry in 1999. It was during this season that the author’s

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49 II Cor 1:3-7 (ESV).

50 Scott Hafemann, ESV Study Bible, 2223.
parents decided to divorce. The author experienced a great deal of confusion and anger during this time. The author sensed a disconnect between the call to ministry within the church and the chaos that was taking place within his own family. However, the author kept these fears to himself, too prideful and discouraged to share openly with others. The situation became worse between the author’s parents, hurtful words, deceit, and ample betrayal on both sides. The fallout came to a climax with a phone call the author received in December of 2002; his father had committed suicide. There was so much pain and confusion in this season of life. Among the many questions the author had, one of the most gnawing was, “How can someone with so much personal struggle ever help someone else with theirs?”

God longs to turn our great tragedies into a story of His great triumph. With the proper discipleship, any private struggle can become a public story to the glory of God. The author has experienced this principle of platform by both receiving and sharing the comfort of God, even in, no, especially in the darkest moments. If the Church leaders do not remind themselves and the people they are discipling of this simple biblical principle, Christians are a people to be despaired. Despairing that our lives are nothing more than a collection of tragedies. Many people sitting in our pews today feel nothing but despair over their brokenness; many who are standing in pulpits quietly feel the same. God has more for everyone. If Christians share in the same sufferings of Christ, the brokenness of this world, they too can share abundantly in the comfort of Jesus Christ. Therefore, they share this good news of the Scriptures with others. They do so not in spite of their struggles, but precisely because of their struggles. This, however, is entirely predicated on how adversity is handled.

Jesus, the author of life, desires to tell His redemption story through the platform of our changed life. The apostle Peter, along with the apostle John, said to the lame man at the temple
gate, “I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.”

The Church does not have just another something to give to people, in attempts to appease or comfort them. The Church has someone to give to the world: Jesus Christ of Nazareth. God does not change our past story, He redeems it for His glory. Mark Batterson wrote about this, “If you feel like you’re stuck in a tragedy, here’s my advice; give Jesus complete editorial control over your life. You have to quit trying to write your own story. And you need to accept Jesus not only as Lord and Savior but also as Author.”

The only way the Church can gain a platform with a hurting world is to allow God to deal with hurting souls. The Author of our faith must have complete editorial control over the entire story, including the tragedies. When Christians live the principle of utilizing personal struggle for God’s platform, they are boldly, “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.”

Key Principles Summarized

Pain is common to all mankind. As Tchividjian remarked, “There are few guarantees in life, and unfortunately, the R.E.M. song Everybody Hurts articulates one of the most pronounced. Everyone suffers. Pain is unavoidable, and it’s not a question of if but when.”

The real question about adversity is not about if people will indeed experience it; the real question is how they will experience adversity. When adversity comes to a Christian, struggles that are common to mankind and not those resulting from our direct sins, will their faith grow as the Scriptures instruct? Moreover, will they be able to disciple others in doing the same? This is the great discipleship burden for the Church and its leaders today.

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52 Mark Batterson, Wild Goose Chase: Reclaim the Adventure of Pursuing God (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2008), 125.

53 Tullian Tchividjian, Glorious Ruin, 15.
The key biblical principles shared in Chapter Three: Perspective, Perseverance, Power, Peace, and Platform can only be effective if they are implemented in and through the trials of everyday life. The knowledge of the Scriptures is fundamental to successful discipleship, but so to is the implementation of biblical truth. Doctrine must always become ethic; what Christians believe about God must be displayed in how we behave. As the author heard a pastor remark about this need for principles to become practices, “Orthodoxy must always become orthopraxy.”

Someone once aptly observed, “God’s office is at the end of our rope.” God does His best work when people come to the end of themselves; adversity is usually the catalyst for getting there. There are clear biblical principles for how to grow faith through adversity. The Church must now take these timeless truths from God’s word and disciple our hurting people with them. The Church must teach and instruct its leaders that Christianity does not merely teach how to maintain the faith in adversity; Christianity applied teaches people how to grow their faith through adversity.
CHAPTER 4
A STRATEGY FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF BIBLICALLY BASED
DISCIPLESHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Principle, Practice and People

The steps of discipling people through adversity are biblical keys that must be placed within an intentional model of delivery within the local church. Discipleship is never happenstance or passive, it is applied. Local church leaders are required to be thoughtful about the biblical principles of discipleship. Church leaders must equally be thoughtful and intentional about the application of those principles through a specific model of ministry within their specific context. Effective discipleship is to be both biblically principled and faithfully practiced. Moreover, effective discipleship begins with two questions each church leader must thoughtfully answer. First, what do we believe about discipleship? Secondly, how are we going to structure our church to make sure these beliefs about discipleship are accomplished in people? Andy Stanley frames these important questions in this way, “It’s critical that we find common ground around two important questions, 1. What is the Church? 2. Who is it for?”¹ It is the role of the leader to ask and answer these questions for their church. If church leaders cannot answer these questions, then the people filling the pews will not be able to either. In addition, the people outside the church will never know that the work of the Church is a gift that was meant for them. It is through the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, church leaders must structure and model their congregations so that discipleship is accomplished within the cultural realities of today. Dr. Stephen Macchia states, “Only when we approach God with open, outstretched hands are we

¹ Stanley, Deep and Wide, 55.
ready to receive from him the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. As Charles Spurgeon once said, ‘we are merely beggars helping other beggars find bread.’”\(^2\) It is the goal of this thesis paper to help local church leaders in this important work of knowing how to better disciple their flock. According to the results of this thesis project research, only 60% of the leaders surveyed felt somewhat equipped to disciple those dealing with adversity. It is the goal of this chapter to present several tangible applications from this project, to better equip leaders who are discipling others in the local church.

Doctrine will eventually become ethic. What a leader believes about spiritual growth will be evidenced in how they disciple others. The same is true for local church congregants. The principles that we hold true will translate to the practices we live. Great principles must be paired with great plans for the benefit of people. The unchanging principles of the Bible must be matched with contextualized plans for the Church. Stephen Covey suggested that every organization always, “Begin with the end in mind.”\(^3\) The Church must begin its work with people looking towards the end goal for them. What then is the one task the Church must accomplish in this world? Above all the other tasks and functions of the Church, there is one that stands far and above. Jesus said to His apostles, the church leadership of that day, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...”\(^4\) The great command the Church has been called to for over two thousand years is discipleship. Discipleship is the serious business of knowing, living, and sharing the unchanging principles of God.

\(^2\) Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, 31.

\(^3\) Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Provo, UT: Franklin Covey 1998), 97.

\(^4\) Matt 28:19-20a (ESV).
Translating a vision for discipleship into a model for discipleship can be daunting. Every church has a model. However, not every church has thoughtfully chosen their model. Moreover, some churches do not know what their model is. The North Point church leadership team argues that, “A church model is essentially the framework a church or a denomination chooses or creates to advance its specific vision. The model is the organizational principle or theme under which programming operates. A model is broader than a specific program.”\(^5\) A leader must spend time thinking about the gap between their church’s vision and their church’s programming. A model is not simply a list of programs, classes, and studies. A model is the philosophical framework that holds principle and practice together.

The worst circumstances of personal struggle can be the optimal context for personal growth, this is indeed the premise of this thesis project. If the purpose of the Church is to make disciples of all people; the Church must effectively do so with the hurting people we are shepherding. Local churches must have a plan for changing people; the Bible does. Changed people should always be the end goal of local church work. God loves people more than anything else in His creation. The changed lives of people are what the biblical principles for discipleship are meant to accomplish. Biblical principles come alive through the discipleship of people. The writer of Hebrews describes how Jesus learned obedience to the Father through suffering. He reminds the Church that, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”\(^6\) When people can understand their adversity through the lens of what God is doing in them, something powerful happens. When people can connect God’s plans for them individually to His larger purposes globally, proper perspective is achieved. This individual perspective and Godly empathy is only gained through one’s struggles.

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\(^6\) Heb 5:8 (ESV).
As church leaders, we are called to make disciples, not just converts. Disciples are made most often in difficult conditions, hospital rooms, battlefields, waiting rooms, and gravesides. Jesus tells us that we are to go to people where they are, baptize them, and then teach them all that He has commanded. It takes a great deal of thoughtfulness and hard work to teach people biblical principles for living, especially in a cultural context of pleasure and prosperity.

The Church has the imperative function of guiding people into a growing relationship with Jesus. There are unchanging biblical principles that guide this function today, five of which were discussed in the previous chapter. Biblical principles do not change, but the plans and models of how to implement them do. Plans and models are meant to be contextualized and shaped by leaders. The five biblical principles for discipling people through adversity gives clear biblical principles for how to do so. However, each individual church and leader is charged with the task of planning how he or she will accomplish these principles. A principle is only as powerful as its implementation in a person’s life. As Stanley remarked about the difference between biblical principles and the various church models and thinking, “Marry your mission. Date your model. Fall in love with your vision. Stay mildly infatuated with your approach.”

Biblical principles should always drive an individual church model. Here is a picture of how this looks:

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Figure 4.1. Church Model

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7 Stanley, *Deep and Wide*, 287.
8 Ibid.
Local church discipleship models are producing exactly what they were engineered to produce. Church leaders are tasked with engineering and implementing discipleship models that connect God’s purposes with God’s people. People are the end result of a good discipleship process. The process (model) should always connect back to the founding biblical principles. In the previous chapter, the author gave five biblical steps for discipling people in and through their struggles. In this chapter, the author will present a suggested model for discipleship. Along with the model, the author will present the corresponding philosophy and practices for discipling people through adversity. The model, along with its philosophy and practices, will present how a local church leader can best implement the five biblical steps for discipleship within their context. The end goal is for a local church leader to be better equipped with the biblical principles and optimal model for discipling the hurting people within their flock.

A Holistic Discipleship Model

Every person who is in a local church, or will be in a local church, has a struggle. Therefore, the discipleship work of the local church must be able to work within the context of personal struggle; this is the biblical way. A discipleship model that will best help us in engaging hurting people will need to be holistic in its nature. Webster’s dictionary defines the word holistic as, “relating to or concerned with the complete systems rather than individual parts.”

Local churches have long been guilty of adhering to discipleship models that are geared towards only one aspect of a person’s life. For instance, knowledge has become the end goal for many discipleship models. Therefore, all of the functions within the model are about getting people to know more about the Bible. While this is a good endeavor, it is an incomplete model. There are many knowledgeable disciples who have not been taught to translate their biblical knowledge

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into a life of character and service to others. God doesn’t just want us to be knowledgeable about Him, He wants us to be more like Him. People who are facing adversity in every area of their lives want to know that Jesus can bring change to every area of their lives.

Leaders need to plan differently, if they are going to achieve the true discipleship of their people. George Barna writes to church leaders about the importance of thinking and planning differently, remarking,

Unless we embrace a comprehensive and far-reaching commitment to radical change in how we conduct our lives and ministries, we are doomed to minimal results. If we hope to make a significant difference in the lives of individuals and in the nature’s culture, then we must improve our intentionality, our intensity, and our strategies...The things that got us to where we are today will not get us to where we need to be tomorrow.¹⁰

Paul writes to the church at Corinth about the idea of holistic discipleship, that is, a discipleship that takes into the account the whole person and keeps the end goal at the forefront. In this instance, he is writing to the Church about what types of food they should eat and with whom. Paul is instructing the Church about their knowledge of the one true God, their behavior towards other disciples, and what the end result should be. Paul writes,

“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God...Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”¹¹

Paul is trying to get the church at Corinth to connect their behavior with their knowledge. He is communicating a discipleship plan that takes into account both the internal and the external. Moreover, Paul is teaching the Corinthians there is more to being God’s people than knowing all the answers about God. There are people within the church at Corinth that are

¹¹ I Cor 8:1-3 (ESV).
hurting and weak. The more knowledgeable brothers and sisters should be mindful of others, and they should be evidencing their maturity in the way they love others in the church. Pastor Peter Scazzero writes, “The sad reality is that too many people in our churches are fixated at a stage of spiritual immaturity that current models of discipleship have not addressed. Many are supposedly ‘spiritually mature’ but remain infants, children, or teenagers...”\(^\text{12}\) The end result of their spiritual growth should be more love of God and more love of people, not one or the other.

A holistic discipleship model combines both philosophy and practice in its composition. Local church leaders must think about how they are going to connect principles with people. This can appear to be simple enough to accomplish as a church. However, when leaders think about discipling people with the biblical steps of perspective, perseverance, power, peace, and platform, it is no simple task to simply transfer those principles to people. This will require church pastors, group leaders, elder or deacon boards, volunteer team leaders, and spiritual directors to be thoughtful and intentional about the philosophy and practices of their holistic discipleship model.

**Holistic Model Philosophy – H4**

A discipleship model that is holistic in nature will have H4. H4 represents a philosophy of combining people’s Head, Heart, Hands, and Habits into your church discipleship model. It is within these four areas that we desire to see the biblical steps of discipleship implemented in an individual’s life. The end result of the holistic discipleship philosophy is that people would be internally healthy and externally focused. Internally healthy and externally focused is the mantra of churches embracing the H4 philosophy of discipleship. This philosophy is derived from a book the author studied by Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges entitled, *The Servant Leader*. Blanchard and Hodges explore what it means to live and lead like Jesus did. In other words, how

can one truly be discipled and how can they effectively disciple others? The philosophy of H4 comprises two internal domains and two external domains: The head and heart being the internal, and the hands and habits being the external. “When the Heart, Head, Hands, and Habits are aligned, extraordinary levels of loyalty, trust, and productivity will result. When they are out of alignment, frustration, mistrust, and diminished long-term productivity are the result.”

Local church discipleship models are built by philosophy and practice. H4 is the philosophy the author affirms for discipling people through adversity. The biblical principles of perspective, perseverance, power, peace, and platform must be understood both internally (Head and Heart) as well as externally (Hands and Habits). An H4 philosophy of discipleship informs the discipler they must engage the whole person with the whole truth of God. Scazzero affirms the H4 philosophy of by writing that, “God made us whole people, in his image (see Genesis 1:27). That includes physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social dimensions.”

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14 Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Church*, 54.
15 Ibid.
H4 - Heart

The Psalmist wrote about this desire for heart discipleship when he penned, “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”¹⁶ Our hearts have an ability to meditate on principles that are pleasing or displeasing to God. During difficult times, the meditations of our heart can guide us to the rock and redeemer of our lives. However, left unto themselves, the consciousness of the heart will turn us towards evil and selfishness. The prophet Jeremiah wrote about the holistic nature of people and how the Lord truly sees them. He wrote, “The heart is deceitful about all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? ’I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his way, according to the fruit of his deeds.”¹⁷

During trials, people will curse God or bless God because of what is stored up in their heart. People rely upon their heart to interpret what is true and what is perceived. When people’s hearts are not connected to the principles of God’s word, they are only seeking the benefit and preservation of self. Hardships have a way of bringing to the surface what is truly one’s heart. As one friend is fond of saying, what’s down in the well will always come up on the bucket.

Struggle acts upon the heart the same way that pressure acts upon a tube of toothpaste, its forces what is inside to come out. “In 1923, pioneer psychologist Sigmund Freud defined ego as the conscious part of a person’s psyche, the part that controls thought and behavior and interprets external reality. In short, he said that ego is self-awareness.”¹⁸ Freud was right in defining a consciousness within each person that controls thoughts, behaviors, and reality. Freud, however, missed the source of a healthy ego. Phil Hodges explains his definition true ego, from his work at

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¹⁶ Ps 19:14 (ESV).
¹⁷ Jer 17:9-10 (ESV).
the Center for FaithWalk leadership. Hodges explains that he has, two simple definitions of ego a
seen in the table below,

![Figure 4.3. Servant Leadership](image)

People’s hearts will either edge God out or exalt God only. Exalting God only is the goal
of holistic discipleship. Exalting God only, especially in seasons of struggle, is a learned
behavior that must be taught and modeled by the Church.

**H4 - Head**

There is a holistic theme when the apostle Paul writes to the church at Rome about what
spiritual transformation should look like. Paul writes in Romans 12,

> I appeal to you therefore, brothers by the mercies of God, to present your bodies
> as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your
> mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and
> acceptable and perfect.\(^{20}\)

Paul presents two options for one’s mind. The mind will be conformed to the realities of
this present world. Or, the mind will be transformed by the renewing from the principles of God.

A.W. Tozer wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important


\(^{20}\) Rom 12:1-2 (ESV).
thing about us.” What one thinks about God and himself is controlled by his individual choices. One must begin to think properly about who God is in order to be able have a proper perspective on God’s good, acceptable, and perfect will. This is how important the mind is to discipleship. When one goes through difficulty they are challenged in what they truly believe. This is why Paul exhorted the church at Philippi writing, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things.”

H4 - Hands

Internal healthy should be evidenced by external focus. This was Paul’s frustration with the church at Corinth over the issues of sacrificed meat in I Corinthians 8. Paul wanted the mature believers to think of others and not just of themselves. Holistic discipleship is built upon the principle of transformation in every area of one’s life. A philosophy of discipleship should not be to have people come to a local church to just sit under and soak up spiritual wisdom as leaders. James, the pastor of the church at Jerusalem, wrote about the desire for holistic development in his church. James wrote, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” James goes onto to explain the person who perseveres and puts into practice the principles of God; this is the person that will be blessed in his doing. Perseverance is one of the five discipleship principles in this thesis project, and it is required for putting into practice the principles of God. The person who puts into practice the principles of God is the person who is truly being discipled. If one desires to see their individual church experience a

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22 Phil 4:8 (ESV).

23 Jas 1:22 (ESV).
complete and true transformation, they must embrace a philosophy that desires the same for each individual congregant. The engagement of service, through our hands, is an essential component of discipleship.

H4 - Habits

In order to continue to grow in our faith, people need regular practices to reinforce the principles of God. Within each holistic discipleship model there are rhythms that maintain the direction of one’s faith. Spiritual habits are modeled by mature believers to those they are discipling. Disciples form spiritual habits as they continue growing their faith over time. What is believed in one’s head and heart will translate to the action of their hands. Over time, this repeated belief and action becomes a spiritual habit. Hodges and Blanchard refer to a habit as, “A daily recalibration of commitment to a vision.” In order to develop proper spiritual habits, a person must be discipled in daily spiritual disciplines. These daily spiritual disciplines form a firm foundation that faith can grow upon.

John Ortberg wrote about one’s required participation in growing their faith. He remarked that,

> Significant human transformation always involves training, not just trying. Spiritual transformation is a long-term endeavor. It involves both God and us. I liken it to crossing an ocean. Some people try, day after day, to be good, to become spiritually mature. That’s like taking a rowboat across the ocean. It’s exhausting and usually unsuccessful. Others have given up trying and throw themselves entirely on “relying on God’s grace.” They’re like drifters on a raft. They do nothing but hang on and hope God gets them there. Neither trying nor drifting are effective in bringing about spiritual transformation. A better image is the sailboat, which if it moves at all, it’s a gift of the wind. We can’t control the wind, but a good sailor discerns where the wind is blowing and adjusts the sails accordingly. Working with the Holy Spirit, which Jesus likened to the wind in

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24 Blanchard and Hodges, The Servant Leader, 85.
John 3, means we have a part in discerning the winds, in knowing the direction we need to go, and in training our sails to catch the breezes that God provides.²⁵

Spiritual habits are the manner in which Christians host their sails and steer their ships. Christians cannot produce or control spiritual growth, just as they cannot produce or control the Holy Spirit. However, Christians can position and prepare themselves to receive all that God desires for them.

God desires for people to grow in their faith, and it is up to Christians to position and prepare their hearts, heads, hands, and habits to do so. Church leaders are responsible to prepare and position their churches to do so as well. A holistic discipleship model is the optimal manner to grow individual faith in the context of a broken world. In order to accomplish holistic discipleship effectively, churches must embrace the philosophy and practices required to do so. The next section of the thesis project will focus on the suggested practices of a holistic discipleship model.

**Holistic Model Practices**

A Holistic model of discipleship is comprised of both philosophy and practice. The H4 philosophy should help guide leaders in how the model connects all areas of an individual’s life, but internally and eternally. Church leaders must be able to apply a holistic philosophy of discipleship into holistic practices within their local churches. It is the combination of philosophy and practice that best applies people in the great endeavor of discipleship. Moreover, it is a holistic model that will best engage all people in their various struggles of life. These are practices that help clarify what it means to disciple people well, especially through their struggles. Andy Stanley wrote, “The church should be more determined than any other kind of

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organization to ‘clarify the win’ simply because the stakes are so much higher: Eternity hangs in the balance.” The best practices for the Church will always return us to God’s purposes. As Pastor Rick Warren wrote, “Plans, programs, and personalities don’t last. But God’s purposes will.” The following are four best practices for implementing a holistic model of discipleship within a church. These practices will help develop a holistic model of discipleship that can best engage struggling people within congregations and communities, the very purpose of God for His Church. The following are best applications for a biblically based model of discipleship.

Community Driven

A holistic model of discipleship will happen best within the context of community. Research conducted in this thesis project showed over 75% of those in community often share their personal struggles with others. Therefore, getting people into community is imperative for effective discipleship in this holistic model. The author is defining community as a group of Christians who desire to grow in the walk with Christ. Church leaders must make it their utmost priority to see that people find community with one another through groups. These community groups can take on all manner of names and have done so throughout the history of the Church. Community groups have been known as House churches, cell groups, home groups, small groups, Bible studies, Sunday schools, and many others in the past. The imperative for local churches is not in the name attached to the individual community groups, the imperative lies within the function that the community group is accomplishing in an individual’s life. C.S. Lewis wrote about the importance of the practice of biblical community when he remarked, “God works in us in all sorts of ways. But above all, He works on us through each other. Men are

26 Stanley, The 7 Practices of Effective Ministry, 71.
27 Warren, Purpose Driven, 81.
mirrors, or carriers of Christ to other men. Usually it is those who know Him that bring Him to others. That’s why the Church, the whole body of Christians showing Him to one another, is so important.\textsuperscript{28}

The practice of community has always been a part of the Church experience. Christians need to be connected to one another for the process of discipleship to be best accomplished. Community, in its various forms, should become the primary environment in which discipleship takes place within a church. If people participate in an effective community group the local church wins. In order to put the practice of community at the forefront of the local church, church leaders must begin to measure everything through the lens of how they connect people to community groups. This will be a major shift for many churches that are program driven, and not community driven. But, what if churches put community first and then began to program around those communities? What if local churches began to see the people as their most effective program? There are currently churches with groups, and there are churches of groups. Practicing a holistic model of discipleship will require a church of groups, churches that seek to be great at community focused life.

Community driven churches will create environments in which hurting people can connect with one another. In this thesis project, the survey results said 91% of church leaders see adversity as an opportunity to disciple people at a deeper level. The apostle Paul advocated for this type of community when he wrote to the church at Corinth saying, “that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”\textsuperscript{29} Together is the key word to Paul’s instruction about community. Isolation and individualism are two great

\textsuperscript{28} C.S. Lewis, \textit{Mere Christianity}, (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 163.

\textsuperscript{29} 1 Cor 12:25-26 (ESV).
enemies for struggling people. People struggle best together. People rejoice best together. The
Christian life is meant to be lived together. Biblical community is a rebellion against the current
culture norms of individual pleasure and prosperity seeking. The Church must practice a better
way for living and growing in a broken world. Biblical community has been at the heart of God’s
purposes from the beginning. The very first thing that God says is not good is “for man to be
alone.”

Group Structure

A group-based mode of discipleship, as required for a holistic model, will necessitate a
de-centralized structure of ministry. A program-based ministry can be accomplished by a church
staff, or by a few key leaders in conjunction with the church staff. Whereas a program-based
model is centralized, a group-based model is decentralized. The more de-centralized a model is
the more structure is required to properly implement and facilitate it. Therefore, group structure
is a necessary practice within the holistic discipleship model. The leadership of a church will
need to provide a compelling model for what community groups are meant to look like and how
they are to function. The following are a few suggestions on how to best structure groups within
a local church. These suggested applications are based on how to best disciple struggling people
within the Church.

First, groups can be organized by gender, marital status, age, stage, activities, and various
other categories. Keep in mind that gender-based groups should be maintained at six to ten group
members. Married-based groups should be maintained at six to ten couples. These numbers are
based on the optimal environment for true community. Most people desire community with those

30 Gen 2:18 (ESV).
who share commonalities with them. People desire to know that others share in the same struggles of life they do. Try to organize groups by categories that can naturally connect them.

Second, groups need to embrace a facilitative model of interaction. Each individual needs to actively participate in the functions of a community group. This means the entire group is encouraged to participate in and even lead some of the various functions with the group. A community group must be a place in which people can both listen and share with others in the journey of life. Facilitative interaction can be understood through this picture of how a group communicates in its study of the Scriptures.

![Teaching Facilitating](image)

**Figure 4.4.** Communication Model (Self produced by New Charlotte Church/Arin Guthe)

Third, give groups a plan for how to spend their time together. The key functions of the group need to be spelled out for the leader and members. The author would suggest three to five functions of a community group. The three that are used within the author’s church are Connect, Study, and Serve. These three words comprise the key functions that are necessary for discipleship at his church. Connect is all about people doing life with other people. It is about sharing in the highs and lows of life. Connect is about making friends you can grow your faith with. Study is the word used to describe the use of the Scriptures within a group. It is imperative
that people are able to draw a correlation between the reality of their lives and the principles of the Scriptures. The study of the Scriptures, in community, allows for this connection to take place. It is the study of the Scriptures that allows the individual and group together to be able to grow their faith. Serve is the function of getting the group to make a difference in the world around them. Service, when done in community, can become a powerful function of discipleship. When people serve they are connected to the other pain and struggle of the world around them. They are also forced to examine what they believe about God and themselves when they serve others. When a leader can clearly define the functions of a group, they make it easier for their leaders to communicate and practice them. Leaders should give expectations for how much time and focus each discipleship function should comprise in the group. Investigate developing a defined structure like this for your church groups:

![Group Structure](image)

**Figure 4.5.** Group Structure (Self produced by New Charlotte Church/Arin Guthe)

Lastly, in thinking about the application of this discipleship model within the local church, provide a leadership structure for each of your community groups. Every group needs a leadership structure. Jesus had a leadership structure with his disciples. In fact, the structure the author suggests as a best practice for groups is very similar to the one that Jesus modeled for us.
There were twelve disciples, but there were three who were closest to Jesus (Peter, James, and John). Group leaders should have three other people within the group who are chosen by them to help lead. These other leaders should be assigned to a specific task or function within the group. These three leaders should become champions of those functions. A great way to practice this is to have a champion for each function of your community group. At the author’s church, each community group has a leader and three champions. This allows for the group leader to share discipleship responsibility and to develop younger leaders within the group. This group structure also allows for an internal accountability to the key discipleship functions of a group.

Leadership Development

The development of community group leaders is vital in a holistic model of discipleship. 60% of leaders surveyed as apart of this project revealed that they only feel “somewhat equipped” for discipling hurting people, 75% of them said they feel “overwhelmed.” The application of the holistic model of discipleship rises and falls upon its leaders. It is the primary role of a group leader to shepherd and guide their individual group members into a growing relationship with Christ. In order for the faith of each individual in a group to grow, the leader of the group must grow in their faith. Group leaders must be equipped to help other group members grow their faith, especially through their hardships. The group leader often stands between the principle of the Bible and the life issue of the group member. Even though the thesis survey showed that 52% have been discipling people more than 7 years, only 43% say they can point to just a few specific Bible verses on how to handle adversity. Therefore, churches need to provide training that equips their leaders to better disciple hurting people. A community group is the best environment for hurting people to grow in, but this will require a competent leader. The
following are three suggestions for developing competent leaders to disciple their group members.

Appoint directors from within the church staff or greater leadership team to train and equip all community group leaders. The development of group leaders needs to be clearly assigned to the leadership within the church. Groups should not operate as a separate ministry, but rather as a function of the entire church. These directors can be scaled to the size of each individual church. Larger churches may use a team of staff directors; smaller churches may use the pastor or seasoned volunteers to accomplish the group director role. This practice ensures that someone is taking responsibility for the function of groups and effectiveness of groups.

Group leaders must have consistent access and input from their church leadership. This input can come from a staff member, a pastor, or another trained leader. The following is a suggested structure for allowing your group leaders consistent access to your church leaders. This practice is based on three one-on-one meetings with a church leader, two huddles (multiple group leaders together), and one meeting with all leaders together. Each meeting, all six, should be strategically positioned for discipleship training and communicating the function of groups.

Table 4.1. 3-2-1 Leader Meeting Model (Self produced by New Charlotte Church/Arin Guthe)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3: One on One meeting with a church leader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2: Huddles with multiple group leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: All leader meeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The last practice of leadership development is creating an environment in which group leaders can be taught at a higher level. Group leaders need to have someone pouring into them. The author suggests calling this training environment, Leadership University. Leadership University will help give leaders the knowledge and training to grow in their faith and to better lead those who are struggling to grow in theirs. Leadership University should be based on the H4 philosophy of development. Therefore, classes should be focused on the Head, Heart, Hands, and Habits of a leader. This is a setting, for example, in which the five keys for discipling hurting people could be imparted to each individual group leader for usage in their groups. Many times it is the lack of discipleship and faith that has created or compounded the struggle that is presenting itself within people. Leadership University will ensure that community group leaders are well equipped with the proper teaching and training to disciple the struggling people of the church. Application is the focused outcome of Leadership University.

Church Culture

The final practice for an effective holistic model of discipleship is creating a church culture that supports it. Webster’s defines the word culture as, “A particular society that has its own set of values and way of life...” Every local church has a culture, a particular set of values and way of living. In order for a holistic model of discipleship to be effective in the lives of people, the local church needs to establish the model and its values as a way of life. The people who sit in the pews of a church should be able to interpret what values are important there. People who are battling with various struggles and hardships should know that the local church is a place where they are welcome as they are, but will be challenged to grow into the people

God has purposed them to be. The following are three suggested practices for creating a holistic discipleship culture at your church.

First, the pastor and leadership team of the church should regularly and intentionally communicate a desired culture of spiritual growth. This communication can happen in various forms. The pastor can preach about the importance of discipleship and community. Someone can share a story about how they grew their faith at the church and the various issues and struggles they had throughout the process. There are so many creative ways the local church can communicate what values and lifestyle is normative, the imperative is that it is being done so intentionally and regularly. Celebration is one of the most effective means of communicating your church values. What gets celebrated the most often gets repeated the best. Celebrate stories of life change, people getting into groups, groups growing in their faith, people overcoming their past mistakes and hurts, etc.

Second, make sure that your holistic discipleship model is being resourced properly. In order for the values and practices of the model to be sustainable, there must be a resource system in place. The desired outcomes of your community groups, people growing in their faith, should be well funded within the church budget. This model, at a minimum, will require curriculum, staffing, group training opportunities, communication tools, and partnerships within the local community. Leaders need to prepare a budget that will enable this model to thrive.

Third, create an easy assimilation system for all people to connect to groups within. Assimilation is crucial to the effectiveness of a group-based model. Every person that attends regularly should know how to join a community group. The assimilation system should be obvious to church members. People, especially those who are wounded, are searching for excuses to not be challenged in their faith and to remain in isolation. Creating an assimilation
pathway will help get these types of people into groups faster. An effective assimilation strategy will be communicated clearly and repetitively. It should ensure that people could move from the larger group environment (typically Sunday morning worship services) and into a small group environment within four to six weeks of their first attendance.

Community driven, group structure, leadership development, and church culture are the essential holistic model practices within a local church. These application suggestions, when put into practice, will connect struggling people with the biblical keys for growth faith during hardship. The following illustration shows the philosophy and practice of the holistic model of discipleship.

![Illustration of the Holistic Discipleship Model]

**Figure 4.6.** The Holistic Discipleship Model: Philosophy and Practices

(Self produced by New Charlotte Church/Arin Guthe)
Implementing a Holistic Discipleship Model

The following are vital suggestions for the implementation and application of a holistic discipleship model in a local church context. These implementation suggestions are derived from the author’s personal leadership experiences within the local church. 1. Begin with the end in mind: What is it that you want the people of your church to be when they have fully embraced your model of discipleship? The end goal for the holistic model of discipleship is for real people to follow Jesus fully in every area of their lives. 2. Have a plan: He who has a plan wins. Many churches cannot articulate their plan for the discipleship of their people, this model will allow you to. Communicating a plan conveys thoughtfulness and intentionality for the discipleship of people. Every single person sitting in a church has some area of struggle or pain that needs to be addressed with discipleship. 3. Get a win: When you begin the implementation of a new discipleship model, it is important to achieve some success early. Find an area of the church that has been a consistent frustration to the leadership and demonstrate how this new model of discipleship with help address that particular area of need. For instance, assimilation is often a challenge in a program-based model so demonstrate how this model will get all people in the church connected. 4. Start small: The holistic model of discipleship is for every area of the church, but you do not have to implement it in every area at once. Look for a space in the church where you can begin implementation. It could be within the current groups or Sunday school program, or it could mean starting just one group with this new structure and focus. Do not try to change the entire church, begin by changing a segment of it. Many times the best place to start implementation is within the leadership team or church staff. A leader can start by applying these key principles and practices within their own leadership team, this can also help the key leaders to learn and understand the model first and help with application in the future.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis project, through numerous literature reviews, leadership surveys, multiple local church examinations, statistical analysis, and analytical commentary has demonstrated the current problem local churches have in adequately discipling the struggling people of their congregations. The research of this thesis work has shown the current realities within our culture have greatly contributed to this problem and created a significant gap for many Christians. The apostle Paul described the difficulty that Timothy and the Church would face in the last days. Paul described these days to Timothy by saying, among other things, that people will be “lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.”¹ Paul continues his letter to Timothy by reminding him to turn to the “God-breathed” Scriptures for help in discipling this group of people. Between biblical principles of discipleship and the cultural desires for prosperity and pleasure there is a gap. This gap is most often experienced in the context of personal adversity, and cannot be dismissed or ignored by the leadership of the local church. The research of this thesis project reveals that 79% of leaders surveyed feel overwhelmed by the struggles presented to them by their disciples. The local church must address this problem by better equipping its leaders with the unchanging biblical keys of discipleship. Moreover, the Church must work diligently to apply these biblical keys for discipleship directly to the changing and difficult circumstances of our congregant’s realities. This will require both the knowledge and the application of how to disciple people through adversity.

This thesis project has shown, through statistical research and data, the dominant cultural realities facing the people of our congregations. The realities of secularism and prosperity

¹ II Tim. 3:4b (ESV).
theology have brought modern Christians into a difficult challenge as they attempt to interpret and grow their faith through the difficulties of this life. Professor Kate Bowler noted about this current reality that, “Millions of American Christians came to see money, health, and good fortune as divine.” Therefore many of the people we, as churches, are attempting to disciple only view their adversity as a curse from God and certainly of no use to their faith and its development. Pew research tell us that, “45% of evangelical Americans believe that if you are faithful you will prosper in life.” Albert Mohler quotes Victoria Osteen when she tells their massive congregation in Houston, Texas that, “their devotion to God is not really about God, but about themselves. Just do good for your own self. Do good because God wants you to be happy...When we come to church, when you worship him, you’re not doing it for God, really...you’re doing it for yourself.”

Effective discipleship can only happen when the Church understands its current reality. What happens to people when life falls apart? What is the message of the Bible, through the Church, to hurting people? Is the Church’s message to just live for more pleasure and prosperity? Mohler aptly observes that, “The problem with prosperity theology is not that it promises too much, but that it aims for so little.” The unchanging biblical principles for growing personal faith in the context of struggle must be known and applied. When the Church does so, it will be able to appropriately apply the culture knowledge and biblical understanding through a compelling discipleship model. The Church will be able to display the richness and adequacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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2 Bowler, Blessed, 7.
3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
The local church and its leaders are positioned best to disciple people through their adversity in this broken world. Pastor Francis Chan affirmed this, remarking, “The exclusive work of Christ offers the inclusive message that stands completely alone in a world filled with hopes and promised ideas that are bankrupt of any efficacious value. This is Christianity, God on a cross dying for people who don’t even care.” The Church has a message that no other no world religion or system can match. The biblical principles and teachings can enable the local church to help people grow their faith because of their trials. This type of discipleship will change the examined prevailing cultural trends. It is the imperative calling of the Church to make disciples of all people. Most of those people will be hurting, struggling, depressed and facing unimaginable life circumstances. All people must know that there is an answer for them in and through their pain and confusion. The evidence has shown that the Church must be better equipped to disciple people through the current context of adversity. The biblical principles and suggested practices of this thesis work can help equip local church leaders, in a hurting world, to go and make disciples.

The Question

Lee Strobel commissioned a Barna survey for his book, The Case for Faith, and asked thousands of adults, “If you could ask God only one question, and you knew He would give you an answer, what would you ask? The top response was, ‘why is there pain and suffering in the world?’” The question on the hearts of people, when adversity and tragedy comes their way, is why does God allow it to happen to me? This is an appropriate question and the Church can aptly speak about the Bible’s answer to personal and global brokenness, and should do so. Struggles are inevitable to

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people because of their own brokenness and the broken nature of this world. However, most people are not asking the question that could help them grow their faith in and through the adversity. The critical question that every discipler must pose to those they disciple is, does this hardship you are experiencing bring you closer to God? Does the adversity that you are experiencing help you to know Christ more? Pastor Eugene Peterson writes about the supremacy of God in all life experiences. Peterson writes, “God is the subject of life. God is foundational for living. If we don’t have a sense of the primacy of God, we will never get life right, get our lives right. Not God in the margins; not God as an option; not God on the weekends, God at the center. God first and last.”

The research of this thesis work reveals the need for disciplers to be better equipped for the leading of hurting people under them. The biblical principles for growing people through adversity are meant to give leaders a biblical knowledge and foundation to better enter into discipleship conversations and settings with people. The apostle Paul communicates this question and desired outcome for his own experiences of hardship in his sanctification process. He writes about his desire to grow saying, “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Paul understood that if he wanted to know God more, he would need to share in God’s sufferings more. As with the premise of this thesis work, Paul knew that growing his personal faith would come through his personal adversities. Again, in II Corinthians 12, Paul writes to the church at Corinth about growing through adversity. Paul instructs the Church in writing,

To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the

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9 Phil 3:10-11 (ESV).
more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.  

In His love and grace, God has rigged the world so that it will not work without Him. Our adversity and struggles only expose the great need that each person has for a right relationship with God, and positions them to better share that message with others. As Scazzero wrote, “The great fruit of choosing the unpopular, countercultural path of brokenness and weakness is that people will be drawn to us, just as they were drawn to Jesus.”

The biblical steps for growing faith through adversity, God’s power, perspective, perseverance, peace, and platform are known best in our weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. As presented in this thesis work, the biblical steps for growing our faith through adversity are best applied in the context one’s diminishing abilities. It is exactly in one’s personal struggle that they are most able to know God in a deeper way. People are allowed, through adversity, to know God’s presence in our lives. God’s presence is evidenced to us by His perspective, perseverance, power, peace, and platform. Pain always has a purpose in God’s economy. Knowing God more through adversity will be directly connected to knowing God’s key steps for growing our faith through it.

The Outcome

The outcome of growing one’s faith through struggle is the absolute confidence in God’s eternal purposes for His people. Both the disciple and the discipler are joint partakers in the miracle of God’s love and commitment to His people. Paul expressed this miracle writing to the church at Rome, “In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For

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10 II Cor 12:7-10 (ESV).
11 Scazzero, The Emotionally Healthy Church, 134.
I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Christians are more than conquerors, in their current adversity, because of Christ. Christians do not become more than conquerors by escaping the pain and sufferings through the pleasures and prosperity of this world. Christians become more than conquerors by knowing Christ in the pain and sufferings of this world. The end goal of discipleship through adversity is for people to recognize they are more than conquerors solely because of the work of Christ. And, therefore, take the biblical principles for growing faith through adversity and rightly apply them into their individual lives and churches.

What if the adversity one asks God to take away or explain is the very circumstance that God is using to change them? What if the Church and its leaders could reframe the experience of struggle? What if instead of constantly defending and explaining why struggle happens, the Church was asking how God is working through it? The findings of this thesis project will give local church leaders an improved understanding of their current cultural realities and better equip them to disciple the hurting people around them. The current problem facing the Church is found in the erroneous answers the culture is giving people about their adversity. Namely, these answers are wrongly pointing to pleasure and prosperity as the end goal of a vibrant faith in God. The solution is found in understanding what God says about adversity and the principles He gives in His word for us to apply in the Church. Salvation is found in the greatness of God’s presence, not in the greatness of worldly pleasure or prosperity. Ortberg remarks, “The word salvation means healing or deliverance at the deepest level of who you are in the care of God through the presence of Jesus. Sooner or later your world will fall apart. What will matter then is

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the soul you have constructed.” The discipleship gap, created by cultural realities, will be overcome with sound biblical principles (steps) and capable discipleship application (model).

A Final Prayer

The author’s prayer for this thesis project is that God would rightly use it for the building up of His Church and its leaders. May the unchanging biblical principles of God be generously, compassionately, and rightly shared with those who know they need them most. May struggling people choose to view their adversity as an opportunity to grow their personal faith. May all people, growing their faith through adversity, be overcome with all that God has prepared for them as His people.

The following is a prayer adapted from an unknown soldier. It expresses the intention of this thesis project for all in the Church.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do great things; I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy; I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power when I was young that I might have the praise of men; I was given weakness that I might feel the need for God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things. I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am, among all people, most richly blessed. Amen.

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APPENDIX

Survey Questions

1 What is your age?
   - 20-35 years old
   - 36-45 years old
   - 46-60 years old
   - Over 60

2 How long have you been a Christ-Follower?
   - 5 years or less
   - Between 5-10 years
   - Between 11-15 years
   - Between 16-20 years
   - Over 20 years

3 What is your denominational background?
   - Baptist
   - Presbyterian
   - Methodist
   - Lutheran
   - Catholic
   - Episcopalian
   - Various
   - None

4 As a Christian, do you believe God allows us to struggle?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Don’t know

5 As a Christian, which one best describes your view of personal adversity?
   - I try to avoid it at all costs
   - I understand it is a part of life but I don’t see meaning in it
   - I understand it is a part of life and I do see the meaning in it
   - I really don’t have an opinion of adversity
6 How has personal struggle shaped your faith?
   - Faith has grown deeper
   - Faith has been weakened
   - It has not changed my faith

7 Do you believe your current circumstances equate to your personal faith?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Do not know

8 Have you ever heard of the prosperity gospel?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Do not know

9 If yes, where did you hear about it?
   - Television
   - Books and Magazines
   - Social Media
   - From other Christians
   - At church
   - Not Applicable

10 As a leader and discipler, how long have you been in a discipleship position with others?
   - 1 year or less
   - 1-3 years
   - 3-7 years
   - 7+ years

11 How often to people talk with you, or with your group, about personal struggle?
   - Never
   - Rarely
   - Often
   - Every conversation or group setting

12 Do you encourage conversations about personal adversity and difficulties?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I don’t have a philosophy about this
13. Do you see adversity as an opportunity to disciple people at a deeper level?
   - Yes
   - No
   - I hadn’t thought about it

14. Could you point people to specific Bible passages or principles about how to handle adversity?
   - Yes
   - Not really
   - A few

15. Do you feel overwhelmed by the problems people bring up?
   - Never
   - Sometimes
   - Often
   - All the time

16. How equipped do you feel to help those you lead and disciple through their life struggles?
   - Very
   - Somewhat
   - Not very equipped
   - Not equipped to help

17. If you could be further equipped by your church to help others, would you be interested?
   - Yes, definitely
   - Yes, somewhat
   - Somewhat
   - No, do not feel its necessary for me

18. Do you think you create a discipleship environment that encourages people to share their difficulties?
   - Yes, I encourage people to open up about their personal struggles
   - I’m really not sure
   - No, It makes me uncomfortable

19. Would the people you lead agree with this statement: God’s #1 desire is for us to be successful?
   - Yes, they would agree with that statement
   - No, they would disagree with that statement
   - I’m not sure how they would answer
20 What cultural influencer has the most impact on the people you disciple?

- Social Media
- Traditional Media
- The Church
- Other
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June 3, 2014

Christopher R. Payne
IRB Exemption 1890.060314: Five Biblical Steps for Discipling People

Dear Christopher,

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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Consent Form

Five Biblical Steps for Discipling People

Christopher R. Payne

Liberty University

Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary

Doctor of Ministry Program

You are invited to participate in a research study regarding the discipleship of church participants and how adversity is essential for spiritual growth and leadership. The study is intended to help identify how Christians deal with struggle so the church can offer a better model for pastors and church leaders. You have been selected to participate in this study because of your leadership position in the local church. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is being conducted by Christopher R. Payne, Doctoral student at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary in the Doctor of Ministry program.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to help leadership transform how they disciple the hurting and struggling people in their congregations. The principles within this project will show how a cultural gospel has infiltrated our church doctrine and often congregants will believe they are entitled to a life free of adversity.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
Please follow the link to Survey Monkey and complete a short survey that should take no more than fifteen minutes. You will not be asked to enter your name at any time. When the survey is completed, your responses will be automatically forwarded to the lead researcher anonymously.

Risks and Benefits of Being in this Study:

The study has minimal risks: The risks involved in this study are no more than you would encounter in everyday life. The benefits to participation: Participation in this project will not benefit you directly. However, the overall benefits will be applicable to church leaders as they learn how to disciple people using biblical principles.

Compensation:

You will not receive payment for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private in a password protected personal computer file. In any sort of report I might publish, I 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. None of the identifying information will be linked in any way to the responses of the participants. All survey responses will be kept in the researcher’s office in order to analyze the data. Federal regulations stipulate that researchers securely maintain their collected data for at least three years. After this three-year period, the data collected from the survey may be destroyed.
Voluntary Nature of the Study:

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

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Christopher R. Payne. You may ask him any questions you may have. You are encouraged to contact him at 8911 Hammersley Drive, Waxhaw, NC 28173, crpayne3@liberty.edu, (704) 617-9459.

You may also contact his Faculty Advisor, Dr. Charlie Davidson, at cdavidson@liberty.edu. 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 Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

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

IRB Code Numbers:

IRB Expiration Date:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NML62TH