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SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS MORE THAN COGNITIVE BELIEF:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL
IN BAPTISTIC CHURCHES IN MASSACHUSETTS

A THESIS PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY DEGREE
IN CONGREGATIONAL CARE AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

BY
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ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA
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Many thanks to the Converge Northeast denomination and its leaders for its guidance and perspective on adult education in Massachusetts.

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ABSTRACT

This research project was designed to examine adult Sunday School in seven baptistic churches in Massachusetts. In interviewing pastors and surveying attendees, an ethnographic study was conducted to discern common practices and to highlight opportunities for growth in the midst of church decline. The researcher examined the biblical concepts of teaching and knowing. The researcher then conducted a literature review in the fields of the history of Sunday school, pedagogical best practices, and advances in cognitive neuroscience of learning. Through field research, the researcher identified five themes common to these Sunday school programs that have impacted the observed results of lack of holistic spiritual formation in Sunday School as traditionally practiced. These themes were: mission, attendance, commitment/ engagement, format, and content.

The field research yielded a pessimistic portrait of adult Sunday School in six of the seven established baptistic churches in Massachusetts. It was shown to be an outdated model practiced by a dwindling group and is neither a church growth tool nor an effective discipleship model that is transforming lives. The model needs adaptation. The researcher described ways, using the five identified themes, in which the aging Sunday School model could be augmented to better fulfill the goals of knowing in the biblical sense, personal transformation, and cooperation with the Holy Spirit's guidance and teachings. Teaching in ways that transform lives is a long-term cooperative effort with the Holy Spirit, and can only be done in the context of a healthy church community. Churches that

do not prioritize discipleship set themselves up for members who are spiritually apathetic, and ultimately those churches may decline over time. These types of enhancements to adult discipleship could serve as vital aspects for revitalization and contribute to long term health of the church.

DEDICATION

To my loving and supportive husband, Howard, whose wisdom, guidance, prayer support, encouragement, and feedback throughout this process are a blessing beyond what words can describe.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the best efforts of dedicated and gifted teachers, adult Sunday School is a model in decline. Class attendance is down, and overall church engagement is waning. The documented decline in biblical literacy and adult Sunday School attendance reflects a spiritual complacency that needs attention and intervention. Many churches have declined to the point of closure. The once-full and vibrant congregations with active Sunday School programs have become merely fond memories for our older congregation members.

Class participation is similar to secular school classrooms, rather than resembling the rabbi-disciple relationship that we observe in the Scriptures. Lessons are often in the form of lecture and discussion, teaching deductively and without much needed scripture memorization, despite pedagogical research which demonstrates these are the least effective teaching techniques. Advances in cognitive neuroscience provide insights into how the brain is designed specifically to acquire, process and store information in working memory in order to understand how best to communicate spiritual truths in learning settings.

The researcher then studied adult Sunday School as it is currently practiced in seven churches and compared and contrasted the descriptions of content and classroom style in order to recommend augmentations to the model of Sunday School to make it more holistic.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM AND ITS CONTEXT

Statement of the Problem

The problem this project addressed was the lack of holistic spiritual formation that results from traditional adult Sunday School models. In response to this problem, the researcher (a) engaged in biblical-theological study of the concepts of teaching, knowing, and mentoring's role in learning in both the Old and New Testaments to better understand the goal of spiritual formation, (b) reviewed relevant literature with special emphasis on educational theories, the history of catechesis, neuroscience of learning, and Sunday School to define the most optimal teaching techniques and environments, (c) investigated adult Sunday School models in current use in evangelical Baptist churches in Massachusetts to define best practices of the same, and (d) developed an alternative adult discipleship model that would enable more holistic spiritual formation of participants that integrates faith into daily life.

Delimitations of the Problem

The research was limited to evangelical baptistic churches in Massachusetts with average Sunday attendance of 200 or less.

The research was limited to churches with established adult Sunday School offerings.

The research was limited to adult classes that typically take place on Sunday mornings and did not include mid-week classes or small groups.

The research was limited to adult discipleship. Youth and children's ministries were not examined.

The research assumed mixed age and gender groups of adults. The unique learning requirements of adults with learning disabilities were beyond the scope of this research.

Assumptions

The first assumption was that adults desire to grow in their faith, and that Sunday educational ministries can help adults do that.

The second assumption was that development of knowledge is more than mere cognitive assent to information, and therefore learning should be more than a lecture-based teaching environment.

The third assumption was that those who are teaching adults are themselves biblically literate and active in their own ongoing spiritual formation with the help of the Holy Spirit.

The fourth assumption was that mentoring is part of a valid biblical model for discipleship, as demonstrated by Jesus with his disciples and the Apostle Paul with Timothy.

The fifth assumption was that since the researcher's role at one of the churches was included in what was being examined, responses may be guarded and not as objective as those gathered in the other church settings.

Subproblems

The first subproblem was to engage in a biblical-theological study of knowing and learning in both the Old and New Testaments to better understand the goal of spiritual formation.

The second subproblem was to review relevant literature with special emphasis on educational theories, the history of catechesis, neuroscience of learning, and Sunday School to define the most optimal teaching techniques and environments.

The third subproblem was to investigate adult Sunday School models in current use in evangelical baptistic churches in Massachusetts to define best practices of the same.

The fourth subproblem was to develop an alternative adult discipleship model that would enable more holistic spiritual formation of participants.

Setting of the Project

The setting of this project was among evangelical baptistic churches in Massachusetts with Sunday attendance of 200 or less. There are very few large churches in New England, so the sample is large enough to be considered representative. Of those churches, some do not have Sunday morning adult discipleship programs at all and some are offering the traditional adult Sunday School model in the way it has been structured from the mid-twentieth century onward. In surveying these churches, it was interesting to gather demographic information about those teaching Sunday School, especially to determine if those teachers were seminary-trained or predominately lay leaders. A 2011 Barna survey revealed that adult attendance at church, participation in Sunday School,

and consistent Bible reading have all declined over a 20-year period. Less than one in five adults (18%) is now a weekly attender in Sunday School, and only a minority of Christians (46%) say they regularly read their Bibles.¹ In the Northeast, these numbers are lower than national averages. Consequently, biblical literacy has declined and increasing numbers of people report feeling that the Bible is no longer relevant to their daily lives.

The research depicted the current state of adult discipleship in Sunday School in these New England churches, describing both teachers and learners, and investigates the curricula, class structures, and methods being utilized. These factors were integral to recommending changes for learning models that will enhance adult discipleship.

The Importance of the Project

The Importance of the Project to the Researcher

The researcher has been involved in Christian education for fifteen years, first in a volunteer capacity as a Sunday School teacher for children, a Vacation Bible school teacher, and youth leader; and then later as a paid staff member overseeing Christian education of children, teens, and adults in multiple church settings. The researcher has also taught undergraduates at a secular college in addition to teaching, assistant teaching, and mentoring female students at the seminary level. In all of these roles, the researcher has observed how students learn both facts and deeper spiritual truths. The researcher has also observed other teachers in those varied teaching environments and reflected on the

¹ George Barna, "Barna Study of Religious Change Since 1991 Shows Significant Changes by Faith Group," August 4, 2011, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/514-barna-study-of-religious-change-since-1991-shows-significant-changes-by-faith-group#.VGz5MdgtDIU> (accessed November 19, 2014).

effectiveness of various pedagogical techniques. The researcher has come to recognize and value the spiritual gift of teaching in herself and others. It saddens her when she sees those who are not gifted in that way attempting to teach. They inevitably do not do it well, and thereby forgo the opportunity to communicate God's truths in relevant and engaging ways. James warns readers that those who presume to teach will be judged more strictly; therefore those who do teach should be gifted and thoroughly equipped to teach with excellence (James 3:1).

The Importance of the Project to the Immediate Ministry Context

The researcher's church was a Converge (formerly Baptist General Conference) church in Worcester, Massachusetts with a 140-year history of inner city ministry. The church is centrally located in the second largest city in New England, in the midst of five colleges, and a large medical school hospital and training center. The neighborhood church was started by Swedish Baptists and the services were conducted in the Swedish language until 1945. The neighborhood began to change and has become quite multi-cultural and diverse in the last 15 years. The average weekly attendance was around 110 and has been slowly declining over that time period as those families who originally started the church have moved outward into the surrounding suburban communities.

The church has a proud, decades-long history of children and adult Sunday School programs that have produced overseas missionaries, youth leaders, church leaders, and teachers. The adult Sunday School used to offer three classes each week, with about 15-20 adults in each class. This has declined as the adult population in the church has aged. There are now 15-20 adults total in adult Sunday School. The researcher

laments this decline and sees its negative effect on the overall health and biblical literacy in the congregation. The researcher hopes that God will bring fruitfulness from the research that can spark excitement and re-engagement of adults in learning the Bible and a desire to apply those truths to their lives.

The Importance of the Project to the Church at Large

The expression, “as goes the local church, so goes the nation” is applicable here. The decline in biblical literacy and adult Sunday School attendance in this church is not an outlier, but is consistent with other churches in the area, and indeed, across the nation. There were many churches in our area which had declined to the point of closure. The once-full and vibrant congregations with active Sunday School programs are fond memories for our older congregation members and it pains them and all teachers committed to God’s Word to witness this aspect of decline of the local church.

The secular culture threatens to drown out the church now more than in decades past. Secular humanist movements, consumerism, materialism, and moral relativism, which are the hallmarks of postmodernism, work against the spread of the Gospel. An augmented discipleship model that could deter or reverse this trend is sorely needed and would likely be gratefully embraced by many congregations.

CHAPTER TWO: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS

Both Christian education and spiritual formation are concerned with knowledge; specifically the role of epistemology (encompassing both empiricism and axiology). Epistemology studies the “origin, nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge.”¹ Christian education is concerned with how values (axiology) are formed—both through verbal teaching and experiences (empiricism) across all age groups—and how these values may be encouraged with biblically consistent behavior as the result.² Spiritual formation is

the process whereby we grow in our ability to pay attention, the ways we help form what God is doing. It involves all the ways we are being formed in the image of Christ in our inner life and outer ministry. Spiritual formation is the congregation growing in its ability to learn from God, to grow toward becoming a community like the Trinity.³

There is overlap between Christian education and spiritual formation, as both are forms of discipleship that seek the Christian’s conformation to the image of Christ. In both areas, we are concerned with how knowledge is acquired and utilized. Christian education in its modern form has largely been a classroom-style model focused on mastery of doctrines to buttress an individual’s relationship with God. Spiritual formation is better suited to a postmodern setting with an emphasis on the value of being

¹ Dictionary.com, s.v. “epistemology,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epistemology> (accessed September 4, 2014).

² Michael J. Anthony, *Introduction to Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-First Century* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 21.

³ John Ackerman, *Listening to God* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 135.

holistically formed through both knowledge and experiences in the context of community.

Many contemporary Christian educators recognize that Christian education in the form of Sunday School is becoming an outdated and less effective model than when it was originally established. That recognition is grounded in the conviction that a relationship with Christ is multi-dimensional, involving more than superficial familiarity with Bible facts and stories. Cognitive belief or assent does not translate to active faith community engagement. Many traditional Christian education models have behavior modification as their unspoken goal. This does not necessarily produce the intended results of transformed hearts and minds or shifts in values from the secular realm to motivation for God-honoring obedience, worship, and service to the community. It can instead produce people who know the so-called correct answers and Bible verses, but whose hearts may be disconnected from true relationship with God.

Moving beyond the modern period into and through postmodernism, a model is needed that retains the orthodox teaching and centrality of the Bible while better enabling formation of the whole person into the image of Christ. When looking toward the future, it is helpful to be informed by the past, so a review of the biblical and theological history of teaching and learning will help us discover what insights we might incorporate in our spiritual formation models going forward.

With that goal in view, the researcher examined biblical passages that speak to the process of transformation that comes as a result of knowing God and being in relationship with Him. The Old Testament model of knowing (as evidenced in the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6) was compared and contrasted with the New Testament models of

knowing that Jesus (John 6:45, Luke 11:52) and Paul (1 Corinthians 8:1, Ephesians 3:19. 4:13, Philippians 1:9, I Timothy 2:4) instruct believers with.⁴ Word studies in both Hebrew and Greek can further illuminate how believers know what they know and the implications of their responsibilities to act upon that knowledge. Emphasis will be given to passages that show Jesus' varied teaching methods (e.g., parables, object lessons, and metaphors) with the goal of demonstrating that varied teaching methods in the process of discipleship are more desirable than traditional Christian Education curricula. The researcher also provided a historical view of Christian education and drew some preliminary conclusions, together with the biblical studies, about what the implications for spiritual formation in the present and future might be, with the ultimate goal of recommending new methods or augmentation of existing methods. It is important to recognize that the process of spiritual formation is more than methods and programs; it is primarily a work of the Spirit. However, churches and Christian educators are called to be active participants and should prayerfully design environments that enable and foster deeper spiritual growth for people with varied learning styles.

Old Testament Knowing

The Hebrew verb *yada* means “to cause to know, notice, teach, declare or make known.”⁵ The root of this word occurs 944 times, and its closest synonyms are *bin* (to discern) and *nakar* (to recognize).⁶ *Yada* is used to indicate God's knowledge of men and

⁴ Unless otherwise specified, all Bible quotations are from the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002)

⁵ Gary D. Pratico and Miles VanPelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 372.

⁶ Laird R. Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 366.

women which begins before birth (Jer. 1:5). There are a range of meanings to the word when used in various contexts. *Yada* can mean to have the capacity of men and women to distinguish between good and evil (Gen. 3:5 and 2 Sam. 19:36). In other contexts, *yada* is used to express acquaintance with a person, such as “do you know Laban?” (Gen. 29:5) but also the more intimate knowledge, such as God knowing Moses by name and face to face (Exod. 33:17, Deut. 34:10). *Yada* is also used to mean sexual intercourse, as in “Adam knew Eve his wife” (Gen. 4:1), and also in matters relating to knowledge of the divine, such as acquaintance with other gods (Deut. 13:3) or the works of Yahweh, as in the plagues sent upon Egypt so the Egyptians might “know” Yahweh is God (Exod. 10:2ff). Ezekiel uses the phrase “that you may know” in warning the Israelites to return to God or be punished (Ezek. 6:7, 10, 7:4, 9, 27).⁷ Thus there are various kinds of knowledge, some possessed solely by God, some imparted by God to humans, and some shared between humans. However, all such knowledge goes beyond the mere accumulation of information.

The Hebrew feminine nouns, *de'a* (knowledge) and *da'at* (knowledge or cunning) are translated as *gnosis* in the Septuagint (commonly abbreviated LXX) and *scientia* in the Latin Vulgate.⁸ The Hebrew noun *da'at* occurs 93 times in the Old Testament, most frequently in the wisdom literature, with 41 instances in Proverbs, ten in Job, and nine in Ecclesiastes.⁹ *Da'at* is used for knowledge that is personal and can also refer to discernment. It is used in Hebrew parallel constructions with *hokma* (wisdom),

⁷ Harris et al., 366.

⁸ Harris et al., 366.

⁹ Harris et al., 366.

understanding (*tebuna*), instruction (*musar*), and law (*torah*). It can therefore be seen as the contemplative perception of the wise person (Prov. 1:4, 2:6, 5:2, Eccl. 1:8).¹⁰ *Da'at* is also used for moral cognition, as in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9, Gen. 2:17).

In the Septuagint, *ginosko* is used to render the Hebrew word *yada*, which has a wide range of meaning: to notice, experience, or observe (Gen. 3:7, 41:31, Judg. 16:20, Eccl. 8:5, Isa. 47:8, Hos. 5:3), to distinguish between things or to know by learning (Prov. 30:3).¹¹ Most frequently, *yada* is understood to mean “knowledge which is empirical and living, obtained by observation of the work of God, which in turn leads to an upright life before God” (Prov. 2:6, Eccl. 8:17).¹² Less frequently, when used with a negative particle, *yada* is used to demonstrate knowledge which was not properly attained, leading to a lack of interest (Jer. 8:7, Ps. 95:10, Isa. 1:3).¹³ There is an action component to this knowledge; one does not gain knowledge merely to keep it to oneself, but to use it and share it with others.

Knowledge of God is always linked with God’s acts of self-revelation, as is said 54 times in Ezekiel: “This is how you will know I am Yahweh.” The testimony of God’s past actions is the basis for knowledge (Ezek. 10:1, 18:8-11). Signs grounded in salvation history, including the Sabbath, are capable of bringing about knowledge of Yahweh

¹⁰ Harris et al., 367.

¹¹ Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 1986), 393.

¹² Brown, 394.

¹³ Brown, 394.

(Exod. 31:13, Ezek. 20:12-20).¹⁴ Knowledge of God is derived from the historical actions of God and the revelation of God to chosen individuals such as Abraham and Moses. These revelations are then to be taught to others as a way of life, including the command to teach children at all times as a continuous imparting of knowledge of God as covenant keeping as discussed in the *Shema* (Deut. 6:6-9). Jeremiah later describes knowing God as evidenced by doing justice and righteousness and taking care of the poor (Jer. 22:15-16).¹⁵ Knowledge is seen as motivating beyond right beliefs (orthodoxy) and to right actions (orthopraxy). God's knowledge often indicates divine choice (Jer. 1:5, Gen. 18:19, Amos 3:2) and "to know" is also a treaty term (Exod. 1:8, Isa. 1:3) with loyalty to the covenants in view (Isa. 1:2, Deut. 11:1-25).¹⁶ The opposite of human knowledge of divine expectations is not ignorance but rebellion (Jer. 22:11-14) against right beliefs and/or right actions, especially with regard to keeping the covenant commands of God.

The Hebrew verb *yara* means "to throw, cast or shoot" in the Qal (the simple or unnuanced types of actions) tense¹⁷, and "to teach" in the Hiphil (used to express causative action with an active voice) tense.¹⁸ From the Hiphil verb we also get the noun *torah*, meaning "law, teaching, instruction and decisions." Teaching is accomplished through chosen messengers who are anointed by the Holy Spirit, such as the prophets and

¹⁴ Brown, 396.

¹⁵ Harris et al., 367.

¹⁶ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 457.

¹⁷ Pratico and VanPelt, 124.

¹⁸ Pratico and VanPelt, 126.

the priests. (Lev. 10:11, Deut. 33:10).¹⁹ This teaching is then to be passed down from generation to generation (Deut. 6). Contemporary readers understand God's steadfast love as motivating the giving of the Ten Commandments and the food purity laws. It is not the mere listing of commands and requirements as was the case in the Hammurabi's code,²⁰ but rather the grounds for training in God's *hesed* (divine steadfast love) and the need for people's obedient response.

The role of teaching and learning in the Old Testament is always seen through the lens of community, as the Israelites considered themselves as covenant people, "the people through whom God would reveal himself to the world."²¹ God teaches through the giving of the Law and the covenants. God also teaches through judgment and restoration (Jer. 16:14-21, Isa. 42:1-4) and through the words and deeds of his prophets. For example, when the people disobeyed God and built the golden calf, the punishments God instructed Moses to administer were announced and witnessed by all of the Israelites (Exod. 32). In Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman who brings God's truth to people.²² God later speaks of a future new covenant that will not be written on tablets, but instead on human hearts. This covenant will supersede the former manner of teaching (Jer. 31:31-34, Ezek. 36:24-27).²³ This covenant would later be fulfilled in the person, words and deeds of Jesus.

¹⁹ Harris et al., 403.

²⁰ Harris et al., 404.

²¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 26.

²² Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits: One Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 241.

²³ Elwell, 457.

New Testament Knowing

The word *ginosko* primarily means to know or to understand, to comprehend, perceive or recognize.²⁴ This recognition is primarily as a result of the senses, particularly sight. This seeing-as-a-way-of-knowing leads to an intelligent ordering of the mind for what has been perceived in the world of experience. Therefore, the verb *ginosko* leads to the sense that we get to know people and things through personal experience with them. This contrasts with *aisthanomai* (to perceive without necessarily understanding) in that the implication of *ginosko* is that when one experiences or “knows” something or someone, they fundamentally understand its nature. Jesus uses this to inform the disciples that God knows their hearts (Luke 16:15).

The New Testament contains the word *ginosko* a total of 221 times, with 82 occurrences in Johannine literature, 50 in Paul, and 44 in Luke/Acts. *Epiginosko* is used a total of 44 times, of which 12 instances are in Paul and 20 in Luke/Acts.²⁵ The New Testament usage of *ginosko* modifies and adds new emphasis on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to the Old Testament conception of knowledge. The New Testament usage expresses a personal relationship between the one who knows and the one known.²⁶ Related words and meanings are also important: *epiginosko* (to possess definitive information about with competence, as in Matt. 11:27, Rom. 1:28), *epiothēmai* (to possess information with the implication of understanding the significance of, as in Acts 19:15, 15:7), *oida* (to have knowledge as to how to perform an activity or to accomplish a

²⁴ Brown, 393.

²⁵ Brown, 397.

²⁶ Brown, 398.

goal, as in Matt. 7:11), *sophia* (to have knowledge which makes possible skillful activity²⁷ (often called wisdom) as in 1 Cor. 1:17, and *gnosis* (the content of what is known, knowledge, as in Rom. 2:20, 1 Cor. 8:1).²⁸

It is useful as a contrast is to understand the opposite of knowing, or lack of knowledge. This lack of knowledge goes beyond just being uninformed and parallels the same issue in the Old Testament. There is also a sense of not knowing something which is different than *aisthanomai*, which is denoted by the verb *agnoeo*, from which we get the English word agnostic. *Agnoeo* means “to not know, to be ignorant of, in error about, or to lack knowledge about something or someone.”²⁹ This *aisthanomai* verb is found 21 times in the New Testament, 15 of those occurrences in Paul’s letters. This can have four meanings: (1) to not understand in the sense of not being cognitively able to grasp an idea or concept, such as the passion predictions of Jesus (Mark 9:32, Luke 9:45); (2) to not be informed about or to have partial familiarity but not a true knowledge that would imply ownership of the ideas, as in the faith that Paul encourages his followers to share because of their grasping of his knowledge (Rom. 1:13, 11:25, 1 Cor. 10:1, 12:1, 2 Cor. 1:8, 1 Thess. 4:13); (3) an ignorance that leads astray, often in reference to ignorance that precedes conversion as in 1 Timothy 1:13 or Hebrews 5:2; and (4) failure to know in a sense of disobedient closing of the mind to the revealing Word of God as in Acts 13:27

²⁷ Walter Bauer, rev. F.W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed., s.v. “*sophia*,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 759.

²⁸ J.P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 334-46.

²⁹ Brown, 406.

and Romans 10:3, or a false understanding that leads to disobedience as in 1 Cor. 14:38.³⁰

Thus we see similarity to the Old Testament where a lack of knowledge is not mere misinformation or ignorance it is regularly linked to disobedience and lack of covenant keeping.

In the New Testament, Jesus inaugurated the new covenant through his ministry of words, deeds, and self-sacrifice (Matt. 12:17-21, 26:28). He fulfills the Old Testament prototypes of prophet, priest and king. His approach builds on that of Old Testament leaders in that he stresses love, justice and mercy over external matters of obedience. The emphasis is that genuine covenant-keeping springs from the inner person. In Matthew in particular, Jesus teaches with authority by quoting the Old Testament law and providing clarification or extension: “It has been said... but I say to you.” This echoes the pronouncements of God in the Old Testament and gives them new significance and applications. For example, he tells them that if you hate someone, you have murdered them in your heart, such that the command “thou shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13) takes on a broader meaning. After his resurrection, Jesus sends his apostles forth with the mandate to perpetuate his teachings (Matt. 28:19, John 21:15-17) in the power of the Holy Spirit who, Jesus tells them, will “teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26).³¹

The New Testament emphasizes that knowing God, as rendered by *oida* and *ginosko*, influenced by the Hebrew *yada*, is not simply an intellectual apprehension but also a response of faith and an acceptance of Christ (John 1:18, 14:7, 17:3, Phil. 3:10,

³⁰ Brown, 408.

³¹ Brown, 398.

John 8:32). Knowledge is both personal and propositional. It is both enlightenment and acceptance of the cognitive aspects of faith, as in the frequent usage of the construct “Do you not know?” (1 Cor. 3:16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15; 9:13, 24). Knowing something implies a stewardship responsibility to act on that knowledge. Thus, when Paul asks rhetorically, “Do you not know,” he is in effect asking if they have forgotten (unable to recall) or are they in fact being disobedient by not acting on knowledge they already possess. This is a very Jewish understanding of knowledge, not just facts recalled and verbalized, but deep understanding and comprehension of the significance of knowledge in the context of a covenant relationship with God. In this covenant relationship there is an expectation and responsibility to act upon one’s knowledge in ways that glorify God.

Colin Brown posits that the Old Testament influence is most clear in the New Testament contexts where *ginosko* means to give recognition to, as rendered *epiginoskete* in 1 Corinthians 16:18. In Matthew 17:12, Jesus speaks of the scribes’ failure to recognize John the Baptist as “Elijah come again” and therefore they did to him whatever they pleased. This illustrates not knowing in the sense that their lack of recognition leads them waywardness.³²

There are also several helpful cognates of the word *ginosko*. The noun *gnosi*³³ means knowledge or practical intelligence and insight, as in 2 Peter 1:5. The noun *epiginosei*³⁴ means a full, personal, precise and correct knowledge and full understanding, or to know in a personal, conscious way, as in 2 Peter 1:2 and 2

³² Brown, 408.

³³ Strong, James. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, s.v. “gnosi” (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), #1108, 576.

³⁴ Strong, s.v. “(epi) gnosi,” #1108, 576.

Corinthians 6:6. A cognate of *oida* is the verb *eidenai*³⁵ which means to respect, know, appreciate, recognize, honor and value, as used in 1 Thess. 5:12. The noun *parekolouthesas*³⁶ means to follow a person so closely that they are always by the person's side, the follower conforming his/her life to the person followed, or joining oneself to the followed person in order to become a disciple, as used in 2 Timothy 3:10. Jesus teaches the disciples in all these ways, having them follow him around and observe him closely, teaching them both how and why he heals and loves people, and giving them the power to heal and cast out demons in his name.

Knowing and Teaching in the Synoptic Gospels

Perhaps the gospel where we most vividly see Jesus as teacher or *rabbi*, is Matthew's Gospel.³⁷ The Gospel is structured around the five major didactic discourses of 5:1-7:27, 10:1-42, 13:1-52, 18:1-35, and 24:1-25:46 which focus on matters of discipleship. Additionally,

the overall flow of Matthew's gospel features a constructive progression of educational formation: from Jesus calling his disciples(4:18-22) to teaching them (5:1-7:27, 10:1-42, 13:10-17, 36-52; 18:1-35; 24:1-25:46) so that they might be disciple in the kingdom (13:52), to sending them out to teach others (28:18-20).³⁸ Matthew's portrait of Jesus as model teacher is as one who practices humility, service, aversion to social recognition, and reverence towards God."³⁹

³⁵ Strong, s.v. "*eidenai*" (*oida*) #1492, 994.

³⁶ Strong, s.v. "*parekolouthesas*," #3877, 1216.

³⁷ Troy M. Troftgruben, quoting various authors' understanding of Matthew as a kind of teaching manual for the early church, "Lessons for Teaching From the Teacher: Matthew's Jesus on Teaching and Leading Today," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 40, no. 6: 388.

³⁸ Troftgruben, 389.

³⁹ Troftgruben, 397.

Matthew's implication is that Jesus' disciples are to carry on his teaching ministry by modeling integrity, to represent Christ's presence, to treat others as Christ did, and to discern the value of both tradition and innovation.⁴⁰ Jesus teaches his disciples by lived example; they get the privilege of seeing him explain the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures in addition to witnessing his miracles and everyday dealings with the people they encounter on the roads.

Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Chapters 5-7, demonstrates Jesus' kingdom authority in teaching, while Chapters 8 and 9 reveal his kingdom authority through healings and miracles. Strauss emphasizes that these two modes of teaching, words and deeds, both confirm one of Matthew's central themes, the coming of the kingdom.⁴¹ Matthew is also regarded the most distinctly Jewish gospels, meaning that his intended audience was primarily Jews rather than Gentiles. This is illustrated by frequent quoting of Old Testament scriptures. Continuing the Old Testament tradition of personified wisdom that is seen in Proverbs, Jesus is seen as speaking the very words of God and having a unique relationship with God the Father (11:25-30).⁴² Matthew's clear intent is to prove that Jesus is the promised Messiah through his words and deeds.⁴³

Mark's Gospel also emphasizes Jesus' teaching authority as being qualitatively different from that of the teachers of the law (1:22, 27). "The scribes passed on traditions handed down to them, while Jesus speaks with divine wisdom and authority."⁴⁴ Mark's

⁴⁰ Troftgruben, 397.

⁴¹ Strauss, 229.

⁴² Strauss, 241.

⁴³ Strauss, 248.

⁴⁴ Strauss, 179.

Gospel is more focused on Jesus' deeds and the crowds' reactions to him than Matthew's Gospel. In Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that his parables are both to conceal and reveal (4:11-12, citing Isaiah 6:9-10). The "messianic secret" is a key component to Mark's portrayal of Jesus: that the implied reader knows he is the Messiah, while the disciples struggle to understand, and Jesus conceals it from the authorities until the time for His passion arrives.⁴⁵ The disciples are portrayed almost hapless in their consistent misunderstanding of what Jesus is teaching in Mark, when compared with the other gospels. They repeatedly fail to understand or grasp the meanings of what Jesus says and does. Mark's Gospel also ends abruptly after the Resurrection, intentionally leaving a tension-filled lack of response by the first disciples, so we do not see the "results" of Jesus' teaching on the disciples in Mark's Gospel, but must look to the other gospels, which are generally regarded to have been written later than Mark's gospel.⁴⁶

Luke's Gospel is often called the "Gospel to the Outcasts" because of his emphasis on Jesus' care for and ministry to the outsiders of his society: the sick, the blind, the lame, the poor and the widows.⁴⁷ The disciples, including some women, are portrayed more positively by Luke, as apostles in training, which sets the stage for their prominent roles in the Book of Acts as those that establish the early church.⁴⁸ Jesus commends them for leaving everything to follow him and tells them they have received divine knowledge hidden from others (10:21-24). Jesus' forgiveness of Peter after Peter's

⁴⁵ Strauss, 180-187; for a discussion of the implied reader concept, 70-71.

⁴⁶ *NIV Study Bible*, 1463.

⁴⁷ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 295.

⁴⁸ Strauss, 282.

denials is seen as restorative teaching, which serves as a model of how he can strengthen his brothers (22:32). Luke's Gospel contains more of Jesus' teaching via parables than the other Gospels, as Luke's Gospel contains 28 parables, Mark has nine, and Matthew has 23. Luke's recording of Jesus' teaching through words and deeds serve Luke's themes of showing Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture (e.g., Luke 7:22, citing Isaiah 26:19 and the costliness of discipleship (14:25-35)).⁴⁹ Luke uses reversals and surprises in his parables in order to challenge his listeners' preconceived ideas: women and Samaritans are worthy of emulation, the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31) reverse fortunes in the afterlife, and the Pharisee and the tax collector are contrasted in prayer because the tax collector receives forgiveness while the Pharisee does not (18:9-14). All of these reversals and surprises serve to teach the disciples the true meaning of following God: that to know God is to humble oneself and do more than merely obey the letter of the Law. Jesus uses these parables to challenge the disciples to expand their thinking and knowledge of what being in relationship with God truly encompasses. He intentionally creates disequilibrium in the disciples' thinking to teach them new ideas which challenge them to live out their faith wholeheartedly.

Knowing and Teaching in Johannine Writings

John's use of *ginosko* is the "fellowship based on the personal equality of the one who knows, the messenger of God who mediates knowledge, and the God who is to be known utterly transcendent."⁵⁰ John emphasizes the dualistic contrast between the unseen God and the visible world. This was an attempt to counteract the nascent heretical

⁴⁹ Strauss, 272-5.

⁵⁰ Brown, 407.

thinking and teaching of the Gnostics at the time of his writings. John was concerned to demonstrate that knowledge of God brings salvation and leads to eternal life (John 8:42-47, 14:17, 15:18, 16:2, and 17:3).

Several passages in John demonstrate his linking of knowledge of God with obedience to God. In John 14:23-24 Jesus states, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not obey my teaching.” Similarly, Jesus said in John 14:31 “the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.” Rodney A. Witacre, in his commentary on John, points out that in the Greek, this is a “*hina*” clause, which conveys purpose. Jesus is going through with the Passion in order that the world may know that he loves the Father.⁵¹ Jesus’ obedience to his Father extends even to laying down his life for his friends: the sacrifice which he says demonstrates God’s love for them. Love and obedience are what Jesus is teaching his disciples so that in turn, they will teach others the same way.

John also quotes Jesus defining teaching as the purpose for which the Holy Spirit or Paraclete will come. “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you”(John 14:26). George R. Beasley-Murray posits that this John is recording an authority statement. The Spirit is sent by the Father as representative of Jesus. The Spirit does not have his own agenda or authority, but is sent to remind the disciples of what Jesus had previously said, and to teach them all things Jesus said. These tasks are

⁵¹ Rodney A. Witacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. Grant R. Osborne, D. Stuart Briscoe and Haddon Robinson (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL. 1999), 369.

complementary and the ‘remembering’ sense of the teaching is significant as it appears elsewhere in John’s gospel. The first instance is in John 2:19 when the disciples remembered what Jesus said in regard to the destruction and rebuilding of the temple. The second instance is in 12:16 when the disciples remembered, after Jesus was glorified, the triumphal entry of Jesus and the Scriptures which spoke of that event. These two “rememberings” show the role of the Holy Spirit, to help the disciples to “both recall these things and to perceive their significance.”⁵² This teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit is often called illumination and “does not involve revelation of new truth, but is the development of the capacity to appreciate and appropriate God’s truth which was already revealed.”⁵³ In 1 John 2:27, John emphasizes the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit’s teaching over and against the supposed “higher knowledge” the Gnostics claimed to possess. Instead, John says “you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit; just as it has taught you, remain in him.” John here refers back to his Gospel’s Chapter 14 passage about the Holy Spirit’s role and the later image of the Vine and the Branches in John 15. He is saying that to remain in God is to be obedient and continue to be open to reminders about what Jesus taught, while simultaneously to comprehend the significance of those teachings and how to apply them (as wisdom) to our lives in grateful obedience to God.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit was given to specific people for specific periods of time, and then removed from them when their mission for God was finished, as was the case with Saul (1 Sam 16:14) and Ezekiel 2:2. The Spirit was also given to others

⁵² George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Book Publishers, 1987), 261.

⁵³ *NIV Study Bible*, Footnote to 1 John 2:27, 1950.

temporarily to help them accomplish a specific goal or task, as was the case in Numbers 11:25. In that instance, the Spirit was taken from Moses and shared with the seventy elders so that they might prophesy, but after they did, he was withdrawn from the elders but remained with Moses.⁵⁴ Thus,

The Old Testament depicts the Holy Spirit as producing the moral and spiritual qualities of holiness and goodness in the person upon whom he dwells...his presence seems to be intermittent and related to a particular activity or ministry which is to be carried out.⁵⁵

The Holy Spirit's role is best understood as temporarily equipping for mission prior to Pentecost, but afterwards is seen as a permanent indwelling that initiates a person into faith, provides them spiritual gifts, and continues to work in them to sanctify them and provide divine guidance throughout their lives.

John's purpose for writing his Gospel is stated explicitly near its end: it is written so that its hearers or readers might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing they might have life through his name" (John 20:31). The Gospel is written not just as a factual historical record but as "a testimonial of faith and in order to reveal an overarching order of significance, a providential plan for history and redemption" which transcends its own time and serves to reveal the significance of a relationship with God.⁵⁶ John's Gospel is also filled with spiritual symbols and metaphors, rather than the parables seen in the Synoptics. Examples include: water, light, bread, shepherd, and gate. Jesus also teaches in the seven "I Am" statements, which are unique to John's Gospel,

⁵⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 868.

⁵⁵ Erickson, 868.

⁵⁶ William Franke, "Gospel as Personal Knowing: Theological Reflections on Not Just a Literary Genre," *Theology Today* 68, no. 4 (January 2012): 422-3.

and Jesus has more individual dialogues (such as the Samaritan woman and Nicodemus) and debates (with the Pharisees and teachers of the law) than in other gospels. In these encounters, Jesus is portrayed as the teacher who is unafraid of confronting people's preconceived notions about right and wrong in order to change hearts and minds.

In his First Epistle, John reiterates many of the same themes and phrases, intending to have his hearers recall the teaching that they had previously been given, such that they might be enabled to resist false teachers. John reminds those hearers that Jesus existed in the beginning and that they have heard, seen, and touched Jesus (1 John 1:1). Therefore they can testify to what they know to be true. He is encouraging his readers to know (in the sense of recognizing the significance of) the teaching they had previously received. In the letter to the church in Philadelphia (Rev. 3), the exalted Jesus promises that Jews would come to the Christian church and know (in the sense of recognition) that the Risen One loved them (Rev. 2: 23, 3:9).⁵⁷

Knowing and Teaching in the Pauline Epistles

For Paul, knowledge is depicted as personal acknowledgement which leads to living in obedience which, in turn, leads to gratitude to, and glorification of, God. The logical extension, of course, for Paul, is that if knowledge does not lead to obedience and gratitude, God's judgment is inevitable and justifiable. This is why Paul contrasts the wisdom of God with the folly of men in Romans 1:22. The implicit idea is that those men do not "know" God in the sense that it motivates them toward changed lives. This is also seen in 1 Corinthians 8:2, 13:12, and 15:34, and Philemon 6.⁵⁸ The "men of knowledge"

⁵⁷ Brown, 407.

⁵⁸ Brown, 405.

that Paul encounters in both Corinth and Colossae were “incipient Gnostics”⁵⁹ (Bruce argues that Gnosticism was not fully formed until the Second Century, so therefore was “incipient” at the time of Paul’s writings) who were impressed with men who possessed much so-called knowledge (i.e. reciteable facts) and were likely offended when Paul tells them that the Gospel of Christ turns that upside down and makes them look foolish by comparison.⁶⁰ Paul contends, most notably in 1 Corinthians 13, that if that knowledge which they took such pride in possessing was not accompanied and empowered by Christian love, it could not build up and strengthen the Christian community and was no more useful than a “clanging cymbal.” He points out that while “knowledge puffs up, love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1).⁶¹ Paul instructs the Corinthians to view wisdom as part of the *charisms* (gifts) of God which should be handled with care as to build up the body of Christ, the church (1 Cor. 12).⁶² For Paul, knowledge is a gift of God, empowered by God, and to be used to build relationships with God and others.

This incipient Gnosticism was part of the heresy Paul confronted in Colossae, which he called “false teaching.” The heresy included ceremonialism, asceticism, angel worship and the “secret knowledge” which was in the form of advanced teaching to the spiritual elite.⁶³ The Colossians were “urged to go in for this progressive wisdom and knowledge (*gnosis*), to explore the deeper mysteries by a series of successive initiations

⁵⁹ F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 261.

⁶⁰ Bruce, 261.

⁶¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 527.

⁶² Hawthorne et al., 527.

⁶³ *NIV Study Bible*, notes on Colossians, 1851.

until they attained perfection (*teleosis*), which was seen as becoming citizens of the spiritual world, the realm of light.”⁶⁴ Bruce credits the work of Bishop Lightfoot in tracing this form of Judaizing Gnosticism back to the Essenes.

This form of Gnosticism, which was present in Asia Minor at the time of the apostles’ writing, was focused on intellectual elitism, angelic meditation, and abstinence from certain foods as evidence of “wisdom.”⁶⁵ Against this heresy Paul portrays Jesus Christ as the One in whom, for whom, and by whom all things were created and hold together (Col. 1:16-20). These words are based on an early Christian hymn of confession in which Christ is celebrated as The Divine Wisdom.⁶⁶ Paul’s wording in Colossians 1 echoes Proverbs 8:22 in explaining Christ as the beginning Wisdom which created the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1.⁶⁷

F. F. Bruce helps us understand that Paul’s conception of wisdom extends into a personification: that of Jesus Christ as the image of God, the Divine Wisdom. Bruce lends support to this aspect of Paul’s Christology from his study of the Alexandrian Book of Wisdom, which was known to Paul, in which virtues were personified.⁶⁸ Thus, in Paul’s writings, the person of Jesus becomes synonymous with Wisdom as it was portrayed in the Old Testament. Prior to Paul’s conversion experience of Jesus, Paul would have understood wisdom as residing in the Torah. But after his eyes were opened

⁶⁴ Bruce, 414.

⁶⁵ Bruce, quoting from J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (London, 1875), 73ff.

⁶⁶ Bruce, 418, quoting from a multitude of sources which are extensively footnoted in his book.

⁶⁷ Bruce, 419, and Hawthorne et al., 969, agree, also citing the philosophy of Philo in Jewish-Hellenistic wisdom speculation.

⁶⁸ Bruce, 123.

by Christ, Christ displaced the Torah as primary in Paul's understanding. Subsequent to Paul's conversion, Christ became greater than, or the end result of, the law, or its embodiment. (Rom. 12:4, Col. 1:15, 1 Cor. 8:6).⁶⁹ Against what Jewish converts might expect, "Paul never describes Christ in terms of Law, rather Paul describes and defines the Law in terms of Christ: the Law comes under the rule of Christ" (Gal. 6:2, 1 Cor. 9:21, Rom. 3:27, 8:2).⁷⁰

For Paul, wisdom is no longer exclusively contained in the Torah, but is accessible as the good news available by faith in Christ. When Paul speaks of the renewing of our minds as an act of worship (Rom. 12:2), he has in mind both the risen Lord (Phil. 2) as well as the power of the indwelling Spirit, who are co-equal in the Trinity, and both serve as the personification of wisdom, love and mercy.

In the early church, to believe the gospel message (i.e., to "know" it) was to become a disciple (Acts 4:32, 6:2). The command to "make disciples" as the Great Commission instructs us to make more of what Jesus made them (Matt. 28:20, 1 Cor. 11:1).⁷¹ Discipleship is woven throughout Paul's letters. Kenneth Burding posits that Paul's understanding of mission and spiritual formation are crucially interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Paul says that "it is through the Scriptures that he is 'equipped to do every work' he has been given by God" (2 Tim. 3:17). So it is necessary that all who

⁶⁹ Bruce, 124.

⁷⁰ Hawthorne et al., 971.

⁷¹ Elwell, 177.

minister let “the word of Christ richly dwell within them in order to be able to teach and admonish” (Col. 3:16).⁷²

For Paul, this instruction is not just for pastors and teachers, but for all who believe. Spiritual formation and mission develop in a believer’s life as he/she experiences ongoing transformation: “Ministry must be an overflow of his/her life in Christ.”⁷³ In the process of this transformation, qualities such as love, boldness, faith, and endurance are cultivated (Eph. 3:11-12, 2 Cor. 3:12). When Paul encourages people to be imitators of him (1 Cor. 4:16), he is doing a ministry not just of teaching but also of role modeling (1 Cor. 4:17). He wants his readers to imitate him because he is seeking to imitate Christ (1 Cor. 1:11).⁷⁴ Paul believes that people are taught not just by listening to our words, but also by observing our lives. This type of experiential and contextual learning and even suffering on behalf of Christ (2 Cor. 1:8-10) should “lead to a recognition, and owning, of one’s weaknesses (2 Cor. 11:28-30, 12:10, 13:4) and the recognition of the need of the power of Christ (2 Cor. 12:9). This is a key insight into Paul’s understanding of how people are spiritually formed.”⁷⁵ The old adage, “learning is more caught than taught” would likely be affirmed by Paul.

Discipleship in the Bible is frequently seen as an ongoing mentoring relationship, where a more experienced person passes on wisdom and facilitates experiences for one less far along in the faith. This long term relationship of both sustained example and

⁷² Kenneth Berding, “At the Intersection of Mission and Spiritual Formation in the Letters of Paul,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6, no. 1 (2013): 23.

⁷³ Berding, 24.

⁷⁴ Berding, 27.

⁷⁵ Berding, 28.

words imparted becomes a key process the Holy Spirit uses to sanctify believers in their everyday lives. “Spiritual mentoring achieves where mere instruction simply cannot. It is always most effective when it occurs in a context of relational trust and on a foundation of shared life experience.”⁷⁶ Scriptural examples include Moses and Joshua, Naomi and Ruth, Jesus and Peter, Barnabus and John Mark, and Paul and Timothy.

Conclusions

Teaching in both the Old and New Testaments is seen as being initiated by God through individuals whom God chooses to speak on His behalf. These individuals model and embody God’s wisdom to communicate knowledge. Knowledge is seen as intimate and empowered by God, and also as coming from observing and interacting with God through his revealed actions and words. Knowledge should motivate men and women toward living that is oriented toward God which manifests as righteousness, justice, and covenant-keeping. In the New Testament, knowledge is seen as personified in Jesus. This knowledge is personal and calls for cognitive belief, emotional commitment and accompanying action. Knowledge is more than mere intellectual apprehension: is a response of faith and acceptance of Jesus and implies a stewardship responsibility of that knowledge. Lack of knowledge is not seen as a mere information or comprehension deficit, but as ignorance or disobedience which leads a person astray into sin. Part of the Holy Spirit’s role in the life of a Christian is to enable remembering of what Jesus taught such that we can appropriate those truths into our daily living in ways that glorify God.

Matthew’s Gospel paints Jesus most clearly as the *rabbi* or teacher, through his words and deeds that personify knowledge and wisdom. Luke’s Gospel contains the most

⁷⁶ Glen G. Scorgie, *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 610.

parables, a transformational way of teaching that causes people to reexamine tightly held cultural beliefs as they grow in their comprehension of the image of Christ and his kingdom. John's Gospel is written as a testimony of faith so that his readers might believe and have life in Jesus' name (John 20:31). John specifically links knowledge of God to obedience to God. John also illuminates the role of the Holy Spirit or Paraclete in our spiritual formation. The Holy Spirit reminds us what Jesus has already taught and helps us understand the significance of that teaching for our lives. Paul presents knowledge that leads to obedience, gratitude, and glorification of God. For Paul, Jesus is the personification of Divine Wisdom, that was previously understood from the Wisdom literature and the Torah, and through which the whole world was created and has its being. This Divine Wisdom stands in contrast to the so-called wisdom of men, specifically the incipient Gnosticism most notable in Colossae, but seen in other early churches as well. Paul consistently writes to the churches that knowledge should lead to transformed lives, not just as a result of hearing words, but also through experiencing life in Christ. Paul also encourages Timothy and others to live out their faith as an example to others in order that those other believers might come to a saving knowledge of Christ. This saving knowledge would then result in the newly saved engaging in mentoring relationships that would fuel the actualization of their beliefs in their day-to-day lives.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

The literature review consisted of four areas: (1) the history of catechesis and the Sunday School Movement, (2) the discipline of spiritual formation and the effects of postmodernism thereon, (3) various educational theories and pedagogical methods, including mentoring with implications for teaching and learning in the church, and (4) advances in the field of neuroscience as they relate to understanding how the brain processes information and forms values, with a view to improving teaching effectiveness.

The proclamation of the Gospel by the first disciples gave way to the development of the kerygma,¹ the essential Christian message of salvation that was to be taught to new believers in the developing churches. This tradition was passed down through generations and “formed the basis for the liturgy and catechisms of the earliest churches as deposited in the documents of the New Testament and the Apocrypha.”² This catechesis is used in the New Testament

simply to refer to instruction. But very early in the life of the church, it came to mean instruction of a particular sort in terms of both form and substance. In terms of form, catechesis was generally verbal instruction that involved a great deal of repetition and memorization. In terms of substance, catechesis came to refer to instruction in the basics or essentials of the faith.³

¹ Douglas Harper, “The Content or Message of Teaching About Christ to Elicit Faith Rather Than to Educate or Instruct,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2010, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php/educate> (accessed August 28, 2014).

² Franke, 416.

³ Darwin K. Glassford, “The Future Is Behind Us: Catechesis and Educational Ministries,” *Christian Education Journal* 9: 176.

This became the foundation for the church's ministry: nurturing faith in people by grounding them in the gospel and teaching them to build their lives around a love for, and obedience to, God within a church community.

One such early catechismal document was the *Didache* from the Second Century. "The *Didache* was concerned with both the catechumen's knowledge and lifestyle. In addressing these two areas it assumes the catechumen's affections are altered through relationship with the teacher and participation in the community."⁴ The *Didache* guides a typical spiritual mentor in a three year relationship with a new believer. "The mentor is to address how the young Christian should respond to persecution, live communally and morally, deal with sin, practice dependence on God, and be nourished through baptism and the Lord's Supper."⁵ This shows the fuller sense of knowing: not just knowing the expected correct answers that had been memorized, but showing evidence of a changed heart and impacted life based on a relationship with God and with the community of faith.

Catechism instruction is concerned with enculturation and socialization into the faith community, involves modeling a way of life, encourages seeing oneself as dependent on God as a way of life, and encourages seeing oneself as accountable for one's knowledge and lifestyle to the teacher and church community.⁶

This formal training was the bedrock of learning in the church for centuries, but then waned in the Middle Ages, some think because of the changing relationships between church and state.

⁴ Glassford, 176.

⁵ Scorgie, 610.

⁶ Glassford, 177.

The Reformers, led by heavyweights Luther and Calvin, sought with great resolve to reverse matters. Luther restored the office of catechist to the churches. And seizing upon the providential invention of the printing press, Luther, Calvin, and others made every effort to print and distribute catechisms—small handbooks to instruct children and “the simple” in the essentials of Christian belief, prayer, worship, and behavior (like the Westminster Shorter Catechism). Catechisms of greater depth were produced for Christian adults and leaders (like Luther’s Larger Catechism). Furthermore, entire congregations were instructed through unapologetically catechetical preaching and the regular catechizing of children in Sunday worship.

The conviction of the Reformers that such catechetical work must be primary is unmistakable. Calvin, writing in 1548 to the Lord Protector of England, declared, “Believe me, Monseigneur, the church of God will never be preserved without catechesis.” The Church of Rome, responding to the growing influence of the Protestant catechisms, soon began to produce its own. The rigorous work of nurturing believers and converts in the faith once for all delivered to the saints, a didactic discipline largely lost for most of the previous millennium, had become normative again for both Catholics and Protestants.⁷

The delegating of the task for teaching had moved from the clergy to the laity, but Luther and Calvin sought to recapture that as a function for church leaders to undertake systematically to produce more uniform discipleship. The model of catechism that began for children was extended to adults, partially because, at the time, literacy rates among

⁷ Benjamin D. Espinoza and Beverly Johnson-Miller, "Catechesis, Developmental Theory, and a Fresh Vision For Christian Education," *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1 (2014): 8.

adults were low and this allowed the church to verbally instruct those who could not read and write for themselves.

This is the historical background to the more modern (Post-Enlightenment, post-Reformation) Sunday School movement of the late 1700s in both England and the United States. Literacy rates were somewhat improved in the upper class but, in the working class, literacy was still low. Churches seeking to teach spiritual truths often needed also to teach basic reading and writing and they used the Bible as their main textbook.

It is important to realize that Sunday Schools were originally just that: schools. They were places where poor children could learn to read. The Sunday School movement began in Britain in the 1780s. The Industrial Revolution had resulted in many children spending all week long working in factories. Christian philanthropists wanted to free these children from a life of illiteracy. Well into the 19th century, working hours were long. The first modest legislative restrictions came in 1802. This resulted in limiting the number of hours a child could work per day to 12. This limit was not lowered again until 1844. Moreover, Saturday was part of the regular work week. Sunday, therefore, was the only available time for these children to gain some education.

The English Anglican evangelical Robert Raikes (1725-1811) was the key promoter of the movement. It soon spread to America as well. Denominations and non-denominational organizations caught the vision and energetically began to create Sunday Schools. Within decades, the movement had become extremely popular. By the mid-19th century, Sunday School attendance was a near universal aspect of childhood. Even parents who did not regularly attend church themselves generally insisted that their

children go to Sunday School. Working-class families were grateful for this opportunity to receive an education.

Religious education was, of course, always also a core component. The Bible was the textbook used for learning to read. Likewise, many children learned to write by copying out passages from the Scriptures. A basic catechism was also taught, as were spiritual practices such as prayer and hymn singing. Inculcating Christian morality and virtues was another goal of the movement.

In both Britain and America, universal, compulsory state education was established by the 1870s. After that, reading and writing were learned on weekdays at school and the Sunday School curriculum was limited to religious education. Nevertheless, many parents continued to believe that regular Sunday School attendance was an essential component of childhood. The trend for permissive parenting in the 1960s, however, meant that a widespread culture of insisting that children go to Sunday School whether they want to or not (especially when the parents were not themselves going to church) was abandoned.⁸

During the Sunday School movement catechism, as it was originally developed, concerned with both doctrinally correct knowledge and evidence of transformed lives observed by a clergy member was, over time, supplanted with classroom style, lecture-based teaching by the laity. “It effectively replaced pastor-catechesis with relatively untrained lay workers and substituted an instilling of familiarity (or shall we say, perhaps an *over*-familiarity) with Bible stories for any form of grounding in the basic beliefs,

⁸ Timothy Larson, “When Did Sunday Schools Start?” Christian History, www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008 (accessed August 18, 2014).

practices, and ethics of the church.”⁹ Catechesis became community-centered and a way of teaching morals and behavioral expectations of the particular community of faith. Catechesis thereby became less evangelistic and more insular in its approach. It was vital that the denomination teach its children the principles and tenets of the faith and thereby point them towards denominational obedience. This was not so much a matter of “social control” as some critics would argue, but of denominational response at a time of openly competing religious rivalries. Sunday School students would grow up, often marry within their class peer group, thus forming the next generation of the church.¹⁰ In this way, Sunday Schools were seen as essential for the relative success of denominations and the passing of the faith from one generation to the next.

The early architects of Sunday School had the best of intentions, including Scottish immigrant to the United States Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) who later became known for his establishment of non-denominational churches. Southern Baptist Sunday School pioneers Bernard W. Spilman and Arthur Flake, , are credited with developing the Sunday School Board and associated curricula and with developing the “Flake Formula” respectively.

These early leaders had a vision of what the Sunday School could be, and they believed that the Sunday School Board, state Baptist conventions “should train and

⁹ Benjamin D. Espinoza, review of J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), *Religious Studies Review*, 38: 13.

¹⁰ K. D. M. Snell, “The Sunday School Movement in England and Wales,” *Past and Present* 164 (August 1999): 138.

challenge church Sunday School leaders to use the Sunday School as a reaching and teaching agency.”¹¹

Alexander Campbell was an educator who emphasized both the family’s and the church’s roles as institutions of religious education. In an essay in 1853 entitled “Church Edification,” Campbell used the metaphor of a school to describe the church’s mission and function, citing the apostles’ teaching in households and congregations as the model. He also argued for the teaching function to be restored to the elders of the church, whom he described as those who “preside over the congregation by their intelligence, their wisdom, and their virtues.”¹² Campbell was a proponent of public school and an advocate for biblical exegesis in the curriculum of public education, unlike Horace Mann (identified by many as the founder of public education in the United States) who favored the Bible to be “read but not expounded in the classroom.”¹³

The first Sunday Schools in America were established in 1785 by various denominations, and Sunday School unions were established in New York and Boston in 1816. At first, Campbell was openly critical of the varied denominational approaches to Sunday School, and viewed Sunday School itself as a temporary measure for moral formation until universal education would be established. By 1844, however, Campbell gained respect for Robert Raikes and in 1847 Campbell responded to a letter by A.W. Corey of Pittsfield, Illinois replying to his concern about sectarianism in Sunday School.

¹¹ James E. Fitch, “Major Thrusts in Sunday School Development since 1900,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 1983), 17.

¹² Richard J. Chero and James Riley Estep Jr., “Educating the Christian: Alexander Campbell’s Pattern for Developing the Christian Character,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* (Fall 2012): 182.

¹³ Chero and Estep, 184.

Campbell's concern for instruction of Scripture in Sunday School outweighed his concerns for sectarian indoctrination, and he stated that Sunday School is of "indispensable importance and deserves the attention and cooperation of all good men."¹⁴

By 1860, however, the Sunday School unions were in noticeable decline as each denomination began to forge its own versions of Sunday School.¹⁵ Thus Sunday School began as an movement not related to any specific denomination in the context of the debate over the Bible's place in public schools, but was relegated to a church-only ministry approximately 100 years later. The emphasis in advancing literacy and the availability of public education gave way to denominational concerns and church-based teaching of the Bible to its members.

The emphasis upon the Bible and the understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of participants were foundational concerns to Baptist denominations, especially Southern Baptist life, and Sunday School was considered to be "a powerful spiritual force which involved as many persons as possible in the study of the Word of God."¹⁶ It was also explicitly stated that the Sunday School would be an outreaching and teaching organization; "it would *never be exclusively a Bible-teaching organization.*"¹⁷ Classes were separated by age and (sometimes) gender-based classes. For example, a class for 20-25 year old men was given the responsibility for reaching and teaching all of the 20-25 year old men in the community. They were not only responsible for the members of their church, but were tasked with reaching nonmembers as well. This was

¹⁴ Cheroke and Estep, 186.

¹⁵ Cheroke and Estep, 185.

¹⁶ Fitch, 20.

¹⁷ Fitch, 21, emphasis mine.

seen as dividing up the evangelism task of the church, making each group responsible for their part in fulfilling the Great Commission. Hundreds of lay people were trained and certified as “approved Sunday School workers” and detailed attendance records were kept.

Churches’ records were examined and tracked by the state conventions. Arthur Flake was a successful Sunday School superintendent in his church in Mississippi and developed a formula which became a rallying point for all Sunday School workers who attempted to make Sunday Schools effective and efficient in reaching their communities. The formula had five points: (1) know your possibilities, (2) organize to reach and teach persons, (3) enlist and train workers, (4) provide space, and (5) go after prospects.¹⁸ This led to huge expansion in Southern Baptist Sunday Schools between the 1920s and the 1940s. “While other denominations were using the Sunday School as a Christian education organization exclusively, Southern Baptists were using the Sunday School as a Christian Education organization and a church growth organization.”¹⁹

As the separation of church and state became more pronounced and codified in American law,²⁰ secular schools chose to differentiate themselves from religiously-based

¹⁸ Fitch, 21.

¹⁹ Fitch, 28.

²⁰ The modern concept of a wholly secular government is sometimes credited to the writings of English philosopher John Locke, but the phrase “separation of church and state” in this context is generally traced to a January 1, 1802, letter by Thomas Jefferson, addressed to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut, and published in a Massachusetts newspaper. (Thomas Jefferson, Jefferson’s Letter to the Danbury Baptists: The Final Letter, as Sent. The Library of Congress Information Bulletin: June 1998. Lib. of Cong., June 1998 (accessed August 7, 2010).

schools (both Catholic and Protestant) by not referring to the Bible in their curricula.²¹ Knowledge of God was therefore left as the sole responsibility of family members and the church on nights and weekends. This fragmentation of secular and sacred accompanied efficiency-driven and age-based separation of learners as Sunday School was further developed and systematized in the twentieth century.²²

Although the numbers of people involved in Sunday School classes increased dramatically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, biblical literacy rates declined sharply. If success were measured in terms of attendance, Sunday School would have been deemed a wild success. Instead, clergy and commentators alike bemoan the “magnificent possibilities of Sunday School that were never realized.”²³

[Sunday School] contained the opportunity to explicitly teach Scripture in a way never possible in the common school. It was in the Sunday School that Bible lessons could be analyzed, discussed, memorized, and tested. There the moral implications of the texts could be fully examined, and specific denominational interpretations inculcated. The failure of these objectives constituted “the darker side of the Sunday School story.”²⁴

This has led to a debate about the scope of effective Sunday School instruction and focused attention on the Scriptural ignorance of students (both adult and youth), even after they attended Sunday School for a number of years.²⁵

²¹ Richard Ognibene, “Catholic and Protestant Education in the late Nineteenth Century,” *Religious Education* 77, no. 1 (January 1, 1982), 13; notably a result of the efforts of Roger Williams, as discussed here and widely elsewhere.

²² Fitch, 188, and A. (Jos) de Kock “Promising Approaches to Catechesis in Church Communities: Towards a Research Framework,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 2: 188.

²³ Ognibene, 17.

²⁴ Ognibene, 13.

²⁵ Ognibene, 17.

Biblical literacy and theological competence is currently waning in most churches. Numerous studies in the 1990s and 2000s quantitatively support this. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life produced the “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey Report” in 2008 which surveyed 35,000 American adults. The data reveals that:

although more than half of Americans say religion is very important in their lives, most hold a non-dogmatic view of their faith, with the majorities believing that there is more than one way to interpret the teachings of their own faith and that many religions, not just their own, can lead to eternal life.²⁶

This clearly reflects the pluralism and moral relativism that characterizes postmodern life. This large study encompassed both those who self-identified as religious and those who did not. There are also studies of adults who have attended Southern Baptist Sunday Schools for many years. In one such study, 508 adults were given a basic Bible knowledge survey, and the average score was 65.6 percent. Although teaching or learning factual Bible knowledge is not the major purpose of teaching in SBC Sunday Schools, it is a worthy purpose. This shows that if 70 percent were a passing score, the average Sunday School participant would fail a basic test of Bible knowledge. The study’s authors also conclude that the overall size of the Sunday School, the frequency of Sunday School attendance, and participant age education levels were all found to have no significant relationship to Bible knowledge. The most influential variable was tenure in Sunday School, with longer tenures indicating higher Bible knowledge. The data shows that it takes 30 years of regular attendance in these Sunday

²⁶ Kenneth H. Gourlay, “An Assessment of Bible Knowledge among Adult Southern Baptist Sunday School Participants,” *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 1: 12.

Schools to raise the average score of an adult to the passing level.²⁷ Martin Marty cites other reasons for biblical literacy decline, including the

America of affluence that developed between 1952 with its Eisenhower-era religious revival and again about 1974 with the beginnings of new style recession, there was an almost unbelievable increase in weekend leisure, much of it at the expense of Sabbath rest. Christians were off at the lake or on to the slopes, and the church remained to be neglected back in the suburb. Sunday School was an almost untransportable institution.²⁸

In response to this evidence of the decline of biblical literacy, George Barna stated that “turning the church around will take a “massive, concerted, long-term effort.”²⁹ Millard Erickson, in *Where Is Theology Going?*, stated that the decreasing biblical literacy among people has likely led to preachers to include less biblical content in their sermons.³⁰ This lack of biblical content in the pastor’s message has resulted in an overemphasis on personal experience to the exclusion of serious education. Erickson says that he fears “spiritual life has become less a matter of learning than it is a matter of experiencing. This has resulted in Christian ministries that put less of a premium on education than they do on personal development and therapeutic wholeness.”³¹

Barna agreed, stating that instead of giving people “disjointed morsels of spiritual truth each week, we must have a systematic method of enabling people to buy into a biblical worldview that transforms their life.”³² Barna recommends that all church

²⁷ Gourlay, 18-19.

²⁸ Martin E. Marty, “The Sunday School: Battered Survivor,” *Christian Century* 97, no. 21: 635.

²⁹ Gourlay, 22.

³⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Going? Issues and Perspectives on the Future of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 42.

³¹ Gourlay, 23.

³² Gourlay, 23.

members receive instruction in Old Testament, New Testament, basic Christian doctrines, and Bible interpretation methods in order to “intentionally and systematically draw people into deeper maturity in Christ.”³³

More than just striving for a goal of a basic knowledge of Bible facts, discipleship should have as its goal maturity of faith. A 1990 study of 287 adults aged 60-94 in a church in Missouri showed that only about 31 percent of adult church members are actively involved in any Christian education programs within the church. “The willingness of believers to contend for the faith as an extension of who they are in Christ is also waning.”³⁴ That same study then went wider, selecting adults in 561 congregations in the Midwest, and concluded that only a minority of adults showed evidence of mature faith when tested with the Mature Faith Index.³⁵ Maturity of faith was defined as “the degree to which persons exhibit a vibrant, life-transforming faith marked by both a deep, personal relationship to a loving God and a consistent devotion to serving others.” Sunday School has lost its focus on faith formation and outreach and has become an “institution born in the century of industrial-era inventions...which is in trouble today as an overadapted social form that no longer has a place.”³⁶

Today, our ways of knowing and learning have become comparatively less systemized as teaching has shifted from the intentionality and personalization of catechesis to impersonal, fact-driven content delivered by teachers with whom students

³³ Gourlay, 27.

³⁴ Glassford, 178.

³⁵ Dennis D. Maxwell, "Group Bible Study and Faith Maturity in Older Adults," *Religious Education* 93, no. 4 (1998): 406.

³⁶ Marty, 635.

do not necessarily have a relationship outside the classrooms. It seems, similar to the recipients of both the Old Testament prophets' warnings and the New Testament writers' reminders, we are losing our knowledge of the *kerygma* through less than optimal catechesis and a lack of mentoring relationships in the Sunday School era. Sunday School, which started as a literacy and outreach movement, became an inward-focused institution concerned with exposure to Bible stories and morals with the hope of denominational continuity. "As the story unfolds, it is divided into formative, growth, and maturation periods that generally correspond to the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, respectively."³⁷ The twenty-first century requires a reemphasis on catechesis and systematic discipleship with the goal of transforming lives that could itself serve as a catalyst for church growth.

It is important to distinguish between traditional models of Christian Education, such as catechesis or, more broadly, religious instruction, and the field of spiritual formation. Although "catechesis" is a term most often associated with the Catholic Church, it has a broader meaning. From the Greek word *katecheo*, meaning to teach by "echoing," this teaching method encourages students to learn by memorizing and repeating truths which are taught. Beyond mere memorization, however, the catechesis process was designed to "resonate in people's lives and form a Christian identity in them."³⁸ Religious education is a more general term, but often focuses on the academic study of religion, i.e. learning its tenets, or what some refer to as "learning about" or "learning from" Christianity. This type of fact-based learning does not typically produce

³⁷ Ognibene, 6.

³⁸ Thomas H. Groome, *Will There Be Faith? A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 103.

the desired spiritual wisdom that transforms lives; but instead can lead to moral therapeutic deism.³⁹ This particular deism is a generalized, and some would argue, watered-down version of Christianity and includes the ideas that (1) a God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth, (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions, (3) the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself, (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem, and (5) good people go to heaven when they die.⁴⁰ Personal happiness and being nice were not the goals that Jesus left his disciples with upon his ascension. Rather, he instructed them to “go and make disciples” in the same way he had discipled them. Jesus was not primarily concerned that the disciples could recite Old Testament verses or that they behave in certain ways, but instead he wanted them to live out the Gospel, to embody the faith in their daily lives. When Jesus asks Peter, “Who do you say I am?” he was not merely looking for a correct answer, but that the answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” was a lived spiritual truth that had transformed Peter's heart and mind. That transformation would then impact the way Peter viewed the world and lived out his faith. Changed behavior is a by-product of a transformed heart and mind, but should not be the goal of Christian education. Behaviorism is the tacit psychology behind most of our current Sunday School curricula. Behavioral objectives are found in them and students are deemed to have learned if they display the expected

³⁹ A term that was first introduced in the book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005) by sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton.

⁴⁰ R. Albert Mohler Jr., “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism—the New American Religion,” *Christian Post* (18 April 2005).

behavior. “The problem with this approach is that learning becomes the mere ability to give a correct response without explaining how the answer was found or what difference the information might make.”⁴¹

Instead, Christian education should be an “intentional process that engages every member and all aspects of each community, teaching and learning together for Christian faith toward God’s reign in the world.”⁴² This intentional, community-based process is the focus of spiritual formation. There are varied definitions of spiritual formation, but a helpful one for purposes of this study is, “God’s work of changing a believer into the likeness of Jesus by creating a new identity in Christ by empowering a lifelong relationship of love, trust, and obedience to glorify God.”⁴³ The process of spiritual formation is intentional, relational, and ongoing. It begins with a response to the call of the Spirit, is then rooted in a commitment to Jesus, nurtured in community by grace, and leads to a deep knowing of oneself as uniquely created and gifted by God for the benefit of others. This is then manifest in love, grace and service to others.⁴⁴ More than knowing about God, disciples are encouraged to recognize God’s leading in their lives and approach Him in relationship.

If a greater number of God’s people really knew God personally, not cerebrally, and obeyed everything He was telling them, we would see revival in our lives, our churches, our nation and our world. Make no mistake; it is the responsibility of spiritual leaders to cultivate an environment in churches that nurtures believers to

⁴¹ Les L. Steele, *On the Way: A Practical Theology of Christian Formation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 63.

⁴² Groome, 163.

⁴³ Barry Sneed and Roy Edgemon, *Transformational Discipleship* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1999), 27.

⁴⁴ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 18.

a face-to-face, heart-to-heart relationship with God. Head knowledge about God is merely an indent in the cerebral cortex that can produce spiritual activity on the outside. Relationship with God is a heart transplant that forever changes lives.⁴⁵

In our time, this is sometimes referred to as postmodern, contemporary adults admit that they believe in God, but that they do not connect their personal faith with that of the church. Indeed, contemporary religion is described as “highly individualized, pluralized, privatized, and secularized.”⁴⁶ Whereas previous centuries have been delineated by rationalism and fundamentalism, the postmodern twenty-first century has been characterized by relativism and loss of shared meanings.

Postmoderns take the vague boundary between “fact” and “interpretation” and draw some startling conclusions. With no sharp distinction between fact and interpretation, or between evidence and conjecture, they see no reason to fully trust anyone’s assertions about anything.⁴⁷

Therefore an anti-authoritarian view and relativistic mindset is prevalent, further exacerbating the declining attendance in and engagement of people in the ministries of the church. By comparison, the premodern conception of knowledge was the highest kind of knowledge, the modern conception of knowledge depended on reason, scientific inquiry, and experimentation, but postmoderns are more concerned with “combatting the power of entrenched interpretations.”⁴⁸ Whereas the Protestant Reformation contended for the correct interpretation of Scripture, postmodernism “distrusts the goal of accuracy; the idea that one interpretation of a scripture passage should be presented as the

⁴⁵ Sneed and Edgemon, 47.

⁴⁶ Friedrich L. Schweitzer, *The Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for Church and Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 90.

⁴⁷ Heath White, *PostModernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 98.

⁴⁸ White, 110.

meaning.”⁴⁹ Postmoderns believe that practically any interpretation can be justified, so the question “is that interpretation accurate?” is not the main point. Instead, other questions like “is this interpretation liberating?” or “does this interpretation advance the cause of justice?” have replaced orthodoxy concerns.⁵⁰ This certainly is a radical shift from the biblical conception of knowledge as divinely-revealed, unchanging, and timeless truth that enables righteous living.

In the contemporary postmodern environment, churches are struggling to recapture the content, meaning, and implications of Christian education and spiritual formation in an ever-increasingly complex time of competing worldviews.

Churches have to deal with the tension between the actual position of being one of the suppliers of “spiritual goods” on the religious market on the one hand and the institutions’ conservative history of transmitting the one and only truth to the next generation on the other.⁵¹

Bill Hull asks the provocative question: “Does the gospel we preach produce disciples or does it produce consumers of religious goods and services?”⁵²

Many authors, researchers, and church leaders acknowledge the problem of biblical illiteracy and Christians’ lack of knowledge about how to live out their faith in their everyday lives. Some suggest recovering the traditional catechesis methods of the early church, others point to Jesus’ unusual teaching methods (parables, similes, metaphors, and object lessons) as a way to produce disciples that really know what it

⁴⁹ White, 110.

⁵⁰ White, 110.

⁵¹ de Kock, 180, quoting from Daniele Hervieu-Leger, “In Search of Certainties: The Paradoxes of Religiosity in Societies of High Modernity,” *The Hedgehog Review* 8, 2006, 59-68.

⁵² Robert W. Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 44.

means to be a Christian. And yet, we cannot reproduce Jesus' teaching simply by copying his methods. He was, in his incarnate state, fully God and therefore omniscient.⁵³ He therefore knew precisely the correct words and deeds that would transform each of his disciples and everyone he encountered along his journey toward Jerusalem. And his public ministry with the disciples was a Jewish *rabbi* apprentice-like (mentoring) arrangement: the disciples lived, walked, and worked with him non-stop for three years. Those are conditions we cannot replicate in the twenty-first century. Acknowledging our finite capacity and our cultural limitations, what are the next steps for Christian Education and spiritual formation that will be most effective in developing disciples who truly know (in the biblical sense) the Lord and the implications of their faith in Him?

Discipling is the model Jesus intended and, in fact, commanded his followers to utilize. Discipleship is teaching from a developmental stance.⁵⁴ Discipleship is

education at its best: it informs, forms, and transforms the very “being” of people. This is to say that education is “ontological” from the Greek, *ontos*, which means “being.” Good education deliberately attempts to enhance who people are and how they live by what they learn...the best of education engages and shapes the whole person.⁵⁵

Clearly the faith must be incarnational, or lived in disciples' lives. Jesus said that his disciples are “those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:28) and those who don't simply profess Jesus as Lord with their lips but rather do the will of the Father (Matt. 7:21).⁵⁶ Educating for the faith, or spiritual formation, is about both orthodoxy

⁵³ Erickson, *Where is Theology Going?: Issues and Perspectives*, 275-6.

⁵⁴ Laurent A. Daloz, *Effective Teaching and Mentoring: Realizing the Transformational Power of Adult Learning Experiences* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986), 237-8.

⁵⁵ Groome, 94.

⁵⁶ Groome, 109.

(right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice). This means an actively modeled and lived presentation of the “lifestyle, ethics, values and virtues that constitute Christian faith”⁵⁷ in the context of community.

From a programmatic view, this includes outreach, service and evangelism in Jesus’ name and for his sake, undertaken as a coaching and mentoring endeavor by more experienced or mature Christians. Hull, in his book, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, posits a six-fold definition of being conformed to Christ’s image: transformed mind, transformed character, transformed relationships, transformed habits, transformed service, and transformed influence.⁵⁸ Hull defines coaching as “a process of imparting encouragement and skills to success in a task through relationship”⁵⁹ Spiritual formation, then, can be seen as a coaching or mentoring effort of cooperation with the Holy Spirit to disciple as Jesus did: by coaching, mentoring, modeling, and sharing ministry with his followers. This kind of curriculum of Christlikeness is a “lived response to God’s loving outreach into people’s lives”⁶⁰ and is both inward (spiritual development of wisdom) and outward (or service) focused. It should be a “pedagogy that enables people to become personally convinced of Christianity’s truth claims and values, and to appropriate its spiritual wisdom as their own, to be formed and informed to integrate it into daily life.”⁶¹ Richard Foster describes this in the incarnational tradition of his book., *Streams of Living Water*: “It makes our body a living sanctuary through which we are daily experiencing

⁵⁷ Groome, 114.

⁵⁸ Hull, 130.

⁵⁹ Hull, 212.

⁶⁰ Groome, 99.

⁶¹ Groome, 195.

the presence of God, learning, ever learning, to work in cooperation with God and deepening dependence upon God.”⁶² James Wilhoit echoes similar ideas in his construction of community formation: receiving, remembering, responding and relating.⁶³

Table 3.1 Wilhoit’s Four Dimensions of Community Formation.⁶⁴

<u>Dimension</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Community Practices</u>
Receiving	Cultivating spiritual openness and continual repentance	Confession, worship, sacraments, prayer
Remembering	Transformational teaching leading to a deep awareness of our being part of God’s community and his beloved children	Teaching, preaching, evangelism, meditation, spiritual guidance, small groups
Responding	Our formation occurs for and through service	Discernment, honoring relational commitments, setting aside prejudices, ministries of compassion
Relating	Our formation takes place in and through community	Hospitality, handling conflict well, honoring relationships, Sabbath observance, attending to pace of life

Groome concurs in referencing Bernard Lonergan’s schema for authentic cognition: attending, understanding, judging, and deciding.⁶⁵

All of these constructions echo the Munich Method (a Catholic catechesis from Germany around 1900) which was a pedagogical approach that was a “significant departure from memorizing a catechism: preparation, presentation, explanation, association, and application to life.”⁶⁶ Timothy O’Connell echoes this with his similar

⁶² Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (New York: Harper One Publishers 1998), 267.

⁶³ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, 50.

⁶⁴ Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, 50.

⁶⁵ Groome, 270.

⁶⁶ Groome, 266.

five dimensions of discipleship says that 5 dimensions: relationship, understanding, commitment, behavior and affiliation.⁶⁷ Groome uses this approach as his basis for his “life to faith to life” approach in which students’ lives are the learning laboratory which is then augmented by clear and systematic (classroom) Christian teaching, with the goal of bringing what is learned back into one’s everyday life.⁶⁸ This integration of orthodoxy and orthopraxy is crucial.

Many pastors and Christian leaders who disciple new believers don’t include evangelism or service as part of the growth and maturation process. As a result, our vision of discipleship can look very different from the experience that Jesus introduced to his disciples. Modern-day disciples of Jesus can confess belief in the right things, but their lives are not congruent with the values and actions of Jesus.⁶⁹

This congruence of faith and action is what Dallas Willard referred to as the missing element of mission that has created a “chasm between belief and action.”

If our commitment to the gospel has nothing to do with bringing good news and practical help to those in need, then we have detached our experience from Jesus’ self-professed mission.⁷⁰

Discipling enables each learner to be treated as an “individual of significance, not a product of mass education. Yet individuals are not isolated. They become part of a community of other believers who all have a contribution to make to the well-being of

⁶⁷ John Sullivan, “From Formation to the Frontiers: The Dialectic of Christian Education,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 7, no. 1 (2003): 9.

⁶⁸ Groome, 271, 279, 282, 297.

⁶⁹ Alan Andrews, *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 199.

⁷⁰ Andrews, 201.

the whole.”⁷¹ In this way, formation is simultaneously individualized and community-focused.

Formation needs to insist on outreach or mission outside itself. If a group’s world doesn’t extend outside itself, the resulting selfish attitude can actually be destructive to the group members’ faith.⁷² As coaches or mentors, Christian educators need to provide practical ways for their learners to live out what they believe. Mentors give tasks or exercises to their mentees, and then they ask the mentees to reflect on what they learned from doing the exercise. The mentor is encouraging and brings the mentee to internalize the lessons in a more lasting way than mere catechetical learning would produce.⁷³ Collinson argues that “the formality of the schooling model can mitigate against the formation of open caring relationships and hinder the promotion of community.”⁷⁴ This discipleship/mentoring approach to learning “embodies a life-centered approach to learning which combines cognitive input, personal experience, and practical involvement, and is appropriate for all ages and stages of life.”⁷⁵

Traditional classroom-style teaching which dominated the nineteenth and twentieth century Sunday School has been imported from secular education contexts and has nearly eliminated the discipleship and learning-while-doing congruent approach that characterized both Jesus’ discipling and the individualized catechetical process as

⁷¹ Sylvia Wilkey Collinson, “Making Disciples and the Christian Faith,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29, no. 3 (2005): 248.

⁷² Hull, 235.

⁷³ Daloz, 224.

⁷⁴ Collinson, 249.

⁷⁵ Collinson, 245.

practiced historically in the Catholic Church. Orthodoxy was given primacy over orthopraxy in Sunday School. Faith became understood as factual knowledge; whether one lived those truths out in their daily lives or not.

In formal [learning] situations the teacher is often the focus of attention, not the learners. Schooling's curriculum-centered approach means subject materials do not arise naturally out of the learning environment and may bear little relevance to the daily lives of learners. Learners may become receptors of information rather than active participants in the process, and frequently spiritual gifts possessed by members of the body and given for the upbuilding of everyone, lie idle or underutilized while those with teaching responsibilities exhaust themselves trying to meet every demand.⁷⁶

Those who emphasize formation at the expense of mission run the risk of producing people who are inward-looking, isolationist, elitist, and ultimately, idolatrous. They care more about the church than the world; they believe they possess faith rather than being possessed by it; they disconnect worship and doctrine from earthly concerns. They spend so much time preserving the past and inducting people into tradition that there is little energy left for creativity and openness to changing circumstances. On the other hand, those who disregard formation in favor of mission run the risk of "running on empty" with insufficient motivational "fuel" to drive ahead or even to sustain what they are currently doing, slip into a worthy but probably sterile activism, ignore hard-earned insights by rushing to embrace the new, which results in exhausting its spiritual "capital" and diminishing its capacity to heal.⁷⁷

Spiritual formation is a more holistic approach which respects learners' individuality, gifting, and learning styles. It provides congruence between faith and life, orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It is formational and transformational. It is incarnational and practical. It should include evangelism, outreach, and mission/service components to reinforce the theoretical knowledge and Scriptural truths taught in catechetical ways.

⁷⁶ Collinson, 249.

⁷⁷ Sullivan, 10.

Educational Theories: Implications for Teaching and Learning in the Church

According to Elwell, “To know is not to be merely intellectually informed about some abstract principle, but to apprehend and experience reality. Knowledge is not simply the possession of information, but rather its exercise or actualization.”⁷⁸

It follows that when we no longer consider learning to be primarily the acquisition of knowledge, we can no longer view teaching as the bestowal of it. If learning is about growth and requires trust, then teaching is about engendering trust, about nurturance-caring for growth. Teaching is thus preeminently an act of care.⁷⁹

Rather than merely throw our hands up in capitulation to the poor state of spiritual formation in the contemporary church and the preponderance of ethical and moral relativism in the postmodern cultural context,⁸⁰ we can look, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to not only church history, but to the related fields of developmental psychology and educational theory for help in understanding the process of how we learn in order to foster learning environments most likely to lead to more authentic discipleship.

This means that it will simply not do for teachers of spiritual formation only to focus the attention of their students upon their inner lives and upon personal spiritual growth techniques; they also need to actively encourage spiritual life to flourish in the contexts of outreach, service, and church ministry... Growth in spiritual formation dare not be an assumption; life in the Spirit must be cultivated. And since there is no shortcut to spiritual growth, groups that focus upon aims and goals need to put time and resources into helping people develop hearts, minds and actions that are responsive to Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Elwell, 457.

⁷⁹ Daloz, 237.

⁸⁰ de Kock, 179, called the “liquidation of modern society, de-institutionalisation accompanied by individualization, which is both a consequence of and a cause of the further erosion of established institutional patterns, including the loss of authority of shared frameworks of meaning.”

⁸¹ Berding, 37.

From the field of developmental psychology, there are two major theoretical perspectives: structuralism and functionalism. Structural-stage theories focus primarily on the structure of thinking or how thinking is done, not on the content of what is being thought about. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development is a:

Progressive reorganization of mental processes resulting from biological maturation and environmental experience. He believed that children construct an understanding of the world around them, experience discrepancies between what they already know and what they discover in their environment, and then adjust their ideas accordingly. Cognitive development or thinking is an active process from the beginning to the end of life. Intellectual advancement happens because people at every age and developmental period look for cognitive equilibrium. To achieve this balance, the easiest way is to understand the new experiences through the lens of the preexisting ideas.⁸²

How individuals assimilate and construct knowledge is foundational in structuralism:

Constructivism is a theory of knowledge that argues that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. During its infancy, constructivism examined the interaction between human experiences and their reflexes or behavior-patterns. Jean Piaget called these systems of knowledge *schemata*. Constructivism is not a specific pedagogy, although it is often confused with constructionism, an educational theory developed by Seymour Papert, inspired by the constructivist and experiential learning ideas of Piaget.

Piaget's theory of constructivist learning, sometimes also called discovery or experiential learning, has had wide-ranging impact on learning theories and teaching methods in education and is an underlying theme of many education reform movements.

Research support for constructivist teaching techniques has been mixed, with some research supporting these techniques and other research contradicting those results.

An advantage of constructivism is that it takes into account the learner's own social

⁸² D. Cunningham and T. Duffy, "Constructivism: Implications for the Design and Delivery of Instruction," *Handbook of Research for Educational Communications and Technology* (1996): 174.

context and previous experiences, rather than being unduly influenced by those of the instructors. Constructivism also contributes to the idea that knowledge is not limited to information transfer on the part of the teacher, but instead is a transaction involving communication, understanding, and absorption.⁸³ The student must engage, and thereby construct his/ her own knowledge. A disadvantage of constructivism is that some view it as eschewing objective truth because, in a sense, ideas must be individually transformed and be categorized or scaffolded with existing beliefs and relatable prior experiences.⁸⁴ Another potential disadvantage to constructivism as strategy is that studies show that students learn better with more structure and guidance from instructors, rather than with the minimal guidance that experiential learning often advocates.⁸⁵ Minimal guidance education leads to diminished learning because of the heavy load it places on working memory.⁸⁶

Many educational designers would advocate a combination of pedagogical techniques that combine structured approaches to teaching new ideas combined with an experiential activity to reinforce those ideas. This collaborative approach would incorporate the advantages of constructivism's approach to assimilating new information without leaving the students unguided and thereby risk the possibility of subjectivism and

⁸³ James A. Thorne, "Biblical Online Education: Contributions from Constructivism," *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 2.

⁸⁴ Colin Wrings, "Teaching Learning and Discipleship: Education beyond Knowledge Transfer," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 2, (2009): 248.

⁸⁵ Paul A. Kirschner, John Sweller, and Richard E. Clark, "Why Minimal Guidance During Instruction Does Not Work: An Analysis of the Failure of Constructivist, Discovery, Problem-Based, Experiential, and Inquiry-Based Teaching," *Educational Psychologist* 4, no. 20 (2006): 75-86. E-book.

⁸⁶ Kirschner et al., 80. Based on the Cognitive Load Theory of Atkinson and Shiffrin (1969) of sensory memory to working memory to long term memory learning. <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/cognitive-load-theory.htm>.

disengagement because of the too heavy cognitive load. Mentoring and small groups' approaches to spiritual formation as education would seem to satisfy the collaborative approach.⁸⁷

By contrast, functional theories of cognitive development focus on the content of emotional life or the life decisions being made. Erik Erikson is the foundational theorist of functionalism.⁸⁸ Erikson's stages of development provide:

a psychoanalytic theory which identifies eight stages through which a healthily developing human should pass from infancy to late adulthood. In each stage, the person confronts, and hopefully masters, new challenges. Each stage builds upon the successful completion of earlier stages. The challenges of stages not successfully completed may be expected to reappear as problems in the future. Erikson's stage theory characterizes an individual advancing through the eight life stages as a function of negotiating his or her biological forces and sociocultural forces. Each stage is characterized by a psychosocial crisis of these two conflicting forces.⁸⁹

While structural theories concentrate on how we think, functional theories focus on what we think or experience. Both of these kinds of theories help us better understand human development and how people form beliefs and develop knowledge. But neither Piaget nor Erikson's theories are distinctly Christian in their orientation. Philosopher Jan Westerhoff, who is concerned with the history of ideas, attempts to address spiritual growth from a developmental perspective in his concept of "styles of faithing."⁹⁰ This

⁸⁷ Debra McGregor and Barry Gunter, "Invigorating Pedagogic Change: Suggestions from the Findings of the Development of Secondary Science Teachers' Practice and Cognizance of the Learning Process," *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 29, no. 1 (February 2006): 43.

⁸⁸ Steele, 69.

⁸⁹ William Crain, *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2011), 54.

⁹⁰ Steele, 72. Westerhoff asserts that faith is a verb and must be seen as active. He also views faith as akin to the growth of a tree. A tree adds rings as it grows but is a tree even when it is a sapling. Also a tree does not shed rings as it grows but adds new rings while retaining old ones. In fact, if the old rings were done away with, the tree would be hollow. So it is with faith. We have faith first in the experienced faith of childhood, later add to it belonging and searching faith, followed by owned faithing in adulthood.

would, of course, assume that the knowledge that makes up the rings of faith he describes is orthodox, biblical, and motivating towards righteous living.

Learning, or ways of perceiving, can be observed in three basic categories or types: deductive, inductive, and abductive. Most traditional Sunday School programs have focused on deductive learning in a functional approach: it involves systematically communicating doctrines that students can learn as part of their denominational tradition. Inductive learning, as seen in a structural/constructivist approach, is more often experienced in the church as part of youth groups or mission trip experiences, because one learns things from experiencing them first-hand.

Abductive learning is neither deductive (doctrines) nor inductive (subjective experiences) but learning that happens in being part of religious practices. In other words, one is not “learning to believe,” but “learning what it means to believe” by participating in worship and the sacraments of the church.⁹¹ These would be similar to behavioral, developmental and apprenticeship paradigms of discipleship.

In behavioral models, the teacher instructs the learner what to learn and how to learn it using deductive reasoning. Historical models of catechesis were behavioral in orientation. In developmental models, the learner learns from the teacher who questions, contradicts, or challenges their personal understandings, which are inductive techniques. In apprenticeship models, “the learner and teacher participate in a shared world with regard to a particular subject.” This can be seen as abductive learning, as in a mentoring or coaching relationship.⁹² The decline in Sunday School effectiveness is likely due in

⁹¹ de Kock, 182.

⁹² de Kock, 184-6.

part to its largely behavioral mode and deductive teaching style. Students of various ages could memorize content and give the correct answers, even if they didn't subjectively care about it or own the information in the biblical sense of knowing the significance of its application to their lives. "In order to be spiritually committed, you have to go beyond mere belief. Believing the right things, including adhering to correct doctrines, is just the beginning."⁹³ The apprenticeship or mentoring model, with its abductive learning approach, "seems to best meet the church's claim to be a community"⁹⁴, when combined with inductive and deductive approaches.

In *Move: What 1000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth*, Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Peterson describe spiritual maturity as a journey of three movements across the spiritual continuum.⁹⁵ Footnote number here In movement one, people move from exploring Christ to growing in Christ by gaining their initial understanding (through worship services and friendships with other Christians) of the Christian faith and accept Jesus as the only path to salvation. In movement two, people move from growing in Christ to close to Christ as they become more active in their personal spiritual practices (scripture reading, tithing, prayer, journaling and solitude) and experiences (evangelism, serving others, spiritual mentors, and small groups). By these means, students progress in a more intimate relationship with Jesus. In movement three, people shift from a daily awareness of Christ's presence to a redefinition of their identity as Christ-centered. The three movements also lead a believer from church-based activities through personal

⁹³ Albert L. Winseman, *Growing the Engaged Church: How to Stop "Doing Church" and Start Being the Church Again* (New York: Gallup Press, 2009), 59.

⁹⁴ de Kock, 188.

⁹⁵, Greg L Hawkins and Cally Peterson, *Move: What 1000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 108.

spiritual disciplines and ultimately to spiritual activities with others (outreach focused). The writers of the book observed these patterns repeatedly and acknowledge that they aren't a formula for spiritual growth but rather encapsulate the intention on the part of churches and individuals to partner with the Holy Spirit to lead their lives.⁹⁶

Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich's book *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of the Faith* is similar in its explanation of development as a spiritual journey. They identify six stages: (1) recognition of God, (2) life of discipleship, (3) productive life, (4) journey inward, (5) journey outward, and (6) life of love. The *Move* book authors think that the journey inward takes place in movement two and the journey outward in movement three, but both books' authors find the pattern of recognition, discipleship and growing intimacy with God and then ultimately identification with Christ as manifested in loving relationships and service to others.

Hagberg and Guelich provide the additional insight of "the wall." The wall is where we "break through the barriers we have built between our will and a newer awareness of, and surrender to, God's work in our lives."⁹⁷ The wall is an individual experience for each of us and is often perceived as painful or crisis-like because of our resistance, but is necessary to process for our transformation into Christ-likeness. Some examples include strong egos, guilt or shame, and high achievers. Going through the wall is often uncomfortable, requires awareness, surrender, reflection, and healing.

The importance of friendships with other Christians, mentoring relationships, and small group participation, in addition to attending weekly worship services, is well-

⁹⁷ Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2nd ed. (London: Sheffield Publishing Company, 2004), 115.

attested. Wilhoit devotes several chapters to the validity of both mentoring and small groups in promoting ongoing learning, constructing new personal reality/identity, developing spiritually accountable friendships and interacting for disequilibrium that brings new insights and teaches biblical conflict resolution.⁹⁸

As the field of educational theory tells us, education, including spiritual formation, is a process that takes time. The fundamental aims of both Christian education and spiritual formation are to create experiences and environments that facilitate Christian formation. Our goal is to assist people in their attempts to make sense out of their lives in light of the gospel.

In order to do this, education for Christian formation must be both priestly and prophetic. Priestly education encourages and cares for people as they attempt to mature in the Christian faith. It comes alongside those who need direction and gently nudges them in the direction of growth. Prophetic education is more forceful in pushing those who are stalled toward maturity.⁹⁹

Discipleship involves a committed, ongoing student-teacher relationship in the context of community that involves “congruency among intellectual, affective, and practical aspects of the faith which constitutes worldview transformation”¹⁰⁰ Traditional catechetical practices and deductive learning classroom experiences should supplant and augment full participation in worship and service-learning components within the Body of Christ.

⁹⁸ James C. Wilhoit and John M. Dettoni, eds., *Nurture That is Christian: Developmental Perspectives on Christian Education*, 1st ed. (Wheaton: Baker Academic, 1995), 225-48.

⁹⁹ Steele, 176.

¹⁰⁰ Steven K. Mittwede, “Cognitive Educational Approaches as Means of Envisioning and Effecting Worldview Transformation via Theological Education,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 17, no. 2 (2013): 306.

Lee Wanak believes that Jesus was this type of teacher. Jesus taught in crowds, in small groups, and to individuals.

Jesus sought to crack conventional thinking and move people toward kingdom ways of thinking; from thinking dominated by culture to a worldview centered in God. Jesus used probing questions, pregnant stories, enigmatic parables, as well as direct experience in transforming the enculturated consciousness of the Jewish people.¹⁰¹

Jesus challenged the disciples and his wider audience in the Sermon on the Mount to go beyond mere obedience to the letter of the Law to understand (know the significance of) the love of God behind the establishment of the Law. He taught new values (pray for your enemy), new assumptions (the Samaritan might be worthy of emulation), and new strategies (love your neighbor as yourself) for personal transformation. He taught that growth progresses from the inside out.¹⁰² “Transformative learning takes place when there is an internal shift in our frame of reference,” such as in the Prodigal Son, The Pharisee and the Publican, and Good Samaritan parables in Luke (Luke 15:11-32, Luke 18:10-14, and Luke 10:30-37 respectively). Loder calls this process “transformational knowing.”¹⁰³ Jesus challenges his hearers’ preconceived notions and traditional understandings of the rules of conventional wisdom and taught them to think in divine wisdom terms. Wanak refers to this process as transforming their enculturated consciousness; Strauss calls those moments the “great reversals” in Luke’s

¹⁰¹ Lee Wanak, “Jesus’ Questions,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 2 (2009): 167-8. Wanak previously defined “enculturated consciousness” as consciousness shaped by culture and traditions absorbed during our formative years and to a significant degree it programs our everyday behavior.

¹⁰² Wanak, 168.

¹⁰³ Wanak, 169.

parables. That process has also been called creating dis-equilibrium by Chet Myers. Newell refers to this process hegemony and counterhegemony.¹⁰⁴

Jesus indicated he was teaching in parables to obscure meanings to outsiders (non-believers) for his own safety until the time was right to reveal himself fully in his passion. However, Robert L. Stein points to the parable as a “disarming means of explication, concluding that the hearers’ effort to interpret a parable involves a kind of active learning that makes for application.”¹⁰⁵ Jesus comes to embody the Kingdom of God among his followers.

Jesus knows that teaching cannot be only verbal if it is to have its desired effect. He seizes teachable moments. This type of teaching is less like factual classroom instruction and more like mentoring or coaching: a teaching for life skills. A curriculum focused on outcomes testable on paper will militate against teachable moments. A broader view of education will lend the freedom for a fuller education. Teachers can understand themselves less as givers of propositions than as ones who are embodied statements suited to a context.¹⁰⁶

In a certain sense, it’s not only merely what we say as teachers, but also about who we are as embodied ambassadors for Christ. This allows us to both live our lives rightly motivated by faith which is grounded in knowledge and serve as models for others to do the same. The disciples were initially drawn to Jesus by his words and deeds, but they stayed with him because of who He was and the ways in which he pointed them to a deeper relationship with God. Contemporary teachers have the same responsibility: we, like Paul, should say, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 4:16).

¹⁰⁴ James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard Publishers, 1989), 116. This is also referred to as cognitive dissonance making moments or discontinuity.

¹⁰⁵ Ted Newell, “Worldviews in Collision: Jesus as Critical Educator,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 13, no. 2 (2009): 142.

¹⁰⁶ Newell, 14; also in Herman Harrell Horne, *Jesus the Master Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1964).

With the history of Sunday School models as well as the educational theories that implicitly inform those models as background, we can turn our attention to that are delve into an understanding of how the brain acquires and processes information, examined with a view towards improving teaching. The fields of cognitive development studies, including those in neuroscience of learning, provide insights helpful to our task of creating spiritual formation environments that foster “knowing” in the biblical sense. What people come to know is what they really care about, Parker Palmer tells us. Faith is not objective but subjective: “We undermine the gospel claim that truth is personal and communal by embracing the rigid but reassuring notion that truth can be captured in propositions. “How inadequate to know about Jesus but not to know Jesus!”¹⁰⁷ Albert Winseman agrees that involvement is not the same as engagement. “Involvement is what you do in and for your church; engagement is how you feel about your church. This is a crucial difference.”¹⁰⁸ He indicates that most churches encourage involvement, but most do not do so in ways that encourage this emotional engagement. Instead of seeing faith development or spiritual formation as an either-or between propositional truth and righteous living, we must see spiritual formation as fundamentally both/and. Our faith must be motivated by a personal and biblical knowledge of God and lead to teaching that motivates living lives which reflect that knowledge in practical ways, such as loving and serving our neighbors as Jesus would. The learning should also be guided by a more experienced Christian, as the biblical examples of mentorship and the *Didache* provide.

¹⁰⁷ Steele, 179, quotes Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). This is a distinctly postmodern idea: most people acknowledge that truth can be captured in propositions.

¹⁰⁸ Winseman, 67.

In some fascinating advances in neuroscience, researchers are now able to map the specific areas of the brain when a person is learning and encountering new information. We can now, in a sense, tell whether someone “knows” something if a region of their brain is activated when they hear that piece of information. Different regions are stimulated in the brain, including neuron’s DNA for gene protein synthesis which allows the brain to “build and evolve for optimal capacity via neuro-genesis and synapto-genesis.” Researchers have documented the brain’s “natural and almost infinite capacity to learn and adapt” in observing damaged cells being regenerated through the addition of specialized proteins.¹⁰⁹ The researchers established the phenomenological correlation between experiences of art, beauty, and truth in gene expression, and further, that “spiritual experiences evoke a gene expression protein synthesis cycle for neuro-genesis and synapto-genesis for brain plasticity and behavioral plasticity.”¹¹⁰ This brain plasticity, or ability to change, has implications for spiritual formation.

Andrew Newberg’s book, *How God Changes Your Brain* identifies specific areas of the brain that he believes help us grow in our understanding of God, and he calls them “God circuits.”¹¹¹ This means that the things Jesus did and said that drew people closer to him also changed things deep within them, including the shape and functioning of their brains, or their “God circuits.” Taking the insights from Newberg’s book, Robert Crosby

¹⁰⁹ S. C. P. Halakatti, “An Introduction for Exploring the Strategic Role of Learning, Teaching, Research and Generation in Building and Evolving Brains for Optimal Capacity,” *Bio Science Research Bulletin-Biological Sciences* 26, no. 2 (2010): 171.

¹¹⁰ Halakatti, 171.

¹¹¹ Hawkins and Peterson, 108

mapped several regions of the brain that were stimulated by the various kinds of learning as represented by several of Jesus' teachings.¹¹²

Historically, the brain was thought to be a static organ, which once fully developed in adulthood, was not very changeable (teachable). Now scientists understand that the brain is, in fact, a dynamic organ made up of neural networks that are structured for flexibility and adaptability.¹¹³ When a person both actively engages in learning and pays attention to what is being presented, he or she increases neural activations associated with that experience. Increased activations lead to increased connectivity in the neural network tissues involved. For example,

Experiencing a visual input, such as a series of both moving and stationary dots, activates the visual cortex, and adding sound stimulus like a bell ringing, also activates the somatosensory cortex. This intentional need for the mind to focus in order to determine which dots are moving versus which are stationary synchronizes neural firings. In turn, the more neural firings occur, the more the cortex is strengthened.¹¹⁴

In seeing the proteins which strengthen the cortex increase this way, researchers have proven that one's brain can and does grow with each new learning opportunity, even as one ages into adulthood. Learning of various kinds helps abilities such as forming and storing representations of experiences (memory function), carrying out cognitive operations (computing math problems, parsing sentences) and planning and executing physical skills (walking across a room, writing a note to a friend, driving a car). If the

¹¹² Robert Crosby, "The Sanctified Brain: Growing in Christ above the Neck," *Leadership Journal* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 25.

¹¹³ Donna Coch, Kurt W. Fischer and Geraldine Dawson, eds., *Human Behavior, Learning, and the Developing Brain: Typical Development* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010), 10.

¹¹⁴ Coch et al., 22.

areas of the brain that impact these functions are injured or malformed, it results in a person's inability to perform these tasks.¹¹⁵

Researchers have identified seven major processes of the brain: proliferation, migration, differentiation, growth, synaptogenesis, regressive processes (cell death and axonal pruning) and myelination. Of these, proliferation, migration, differentiation, and growth start and stop at relatively fixed chronological ages.¹¹⁶ Synaptogenesis, regressive processes and myelination continue well into adulthood. In fact, because the brain has acquired 90 percent of its adult volume by age 6, this means in order to acquire cognitive skills after age 6, one must rely primarily on synaptogenesis, regressive processes and myelination. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) results suggest that there are significant reductions in grey matter (in the frontal and parietal regions mainly) and significant increases in white matter between the ages of 6 and 20.¹¹⁷

The increase in white matter demonstrates the progressive myelination of connecting fibers. Myelination of cortical fibers proceeds from the back (occipital lobe) to front of the head (frontal lobe) during this time. Given that the frontal region is involved in abilities such as working memory, executive function skills, one would expect these to increase in adolescence. In the corpus callosum, myelination of connecting fibers between the hemispheres proceeds from the anterior (frontal) portions to the posterior regions. These produce the ability to communicate and process math, language and special problems, as well as developing long term memory.¹¹⁸

This adage appears frequently in neuroscience literature: “neurons that fire together, wire together.” This means that neurons that are in close proximity to each other and are repeatedly activated at the same time tend to form synapses, the microscopic gaps

¹¹⁵ Coch et al., 33.

¹¹⁶ Coch et al., 35. Seventh prenatal month for proliferation to age 21 for growth.

¹¹⁷ Coch et al., 35.

¹¹⁸ Coch et al., 36.

between the axon of one neuron and the dendrite of another, together. Clusters of neurons will fire only when they receive input fibers from different pathways (such as eyes and ears). Over time, these pathways are strengthened. Thus, the psychological term “*learning* can be said to correspond to the neuroscientific term *synaptic reorganization*.”¹¹⁹ Some researchers have connected this to the concept of operant learning, or behavioral adaptation.

It is now well accepted that long-lasting behavioral modifications via operant contingencies are the result of significant changes in the brain: the strengthening of synaptic connections, reconfiguring of neural ensembles, synthesis of new proteins, upregulation of gene expression, and epigenetic modifications.¹²⁰

Researcher Ann E. Kelley has shown that dopamine (D1) and glutamate N-methyl-D-Aspartate receptors (NMDAR) serve crucial functions in neural plasticity, learning and memory, and even addictions. These chemicals are active in “protein synthesis that leads to operant learning throughout a cortico-striatal-limbic network.”¹²¹ Chromatin, the protein that organizes and condenses genomic DNA, is in the protein synthesis intracellular cascade that leads to long-lasting behavioral change. The brain’s plasticity allows new knowledge to be “imprinted” through NMDAR and operant learning to enable long-lasting behavioral change.

¹¹⁹ Coch et al., 37. Operant Learning is one of the most elementary forms of learning; through an interchange with its environment, an animal is able to learn about the consequences of its actions and thereby modify the current environment through new behaviors to produce more favorable conditions.

¹²⁰ Michael E Andrejewski, Brenda L. McKee, Anne E. Baldwin, Lindsay Burns, and Pepe Hernandez, “The Clinical Relevance of Neuroplasticity in Corticostriatal Networks during Operant Learning,” *Neuroscience and Behavioral Reviews* 37 (2013): 2072.

¹²¹ Andrejewski et al., 2071. The Limbic areas are the structures at the base of the cerebrum that control emotions.

People with defects in memory or inability to recall information (such as those with amnesia) have sustained damage to “key structures in the medial temporal lobe (hippocampus, parahippocampal gyrus, and perirhinal cortex).”¹²²

The hippocampal complex acts to bind co-activated cortical representations through projections that extend from areas of cortical activity to the hippocampus. Each time they are reactivated, they establish cortical-to-cortical connections which create memories.¹²³

Studies using MRI scans also support differences in verbal and special working memory. For example, when adults are asked to perform tasks that are thought to involve verbal working memory, areas of the left parietal and left frontal lobes are particularly active. In contrast, when the same individuals are asked to perform tasks that are thought to involve special working memory, areas of the right parietal and right frontal lobes are active.¹²⁴

The brain is an interconnected network that is designed to create and retain memories, or associations between stimuli and information.¹²⁵ The brain has the function of focusing, reasoning, deciding and understanding. With these functions, the mind uses the information stored in the brain and reorganizes it for the meaningful conduct of everyday life. In this way, the brain, or mind, becomes the meaning maker. If the learner deems this information meaningful, the hippocampus encodes information and sends it to the amygdala, the almond-shaped structure in the brain’s limbic system that encodes emotional messages and stores them as long-term memories.¹²⁶

¹²² Coch et al., 37. The cortex is the thin but tough layer of cells covering the cerebrum that contains all the neurons used for cognitive and motor processing. The hippocampus is the brain structure that compares new learning to past learning and encodes information from working memory to long term storage.

¹²³ Coch et al., 37.

¹²⁴ Coch et al., 39.

¹²⁵ Jeb Schenck and Jessie Cruickshank, “Evolving Kolb: Experiential Education in the Age of Neuroscience,” *Journal of Experiential Education* 38, no. 1 (2015): 76.

¹²⁶ David Sousa, *How the Brain Learns*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2011), 83.

Kurt Fischer introduced Dynamic Skill Theory, which builds on Piaget's hierarchical description of learning. Fisher found that learning does not progress in a step-ladder fashion as Piaget described and as many experiential educators assumed but is rather a web- or spiral-shaped fractal.¹²⁷

One key aspect of the model is the use of glucose as fuel for the mind as it learns.¹²⁸ The so-called front end of learning (which happens unconsciously) is energy-efficient learning and the back-end of learning (conscious learning) is energy demanding. Back end learning does not happen spontaneously, but is instead most effective when guided and facilitated by a teacher.¹²⁹ Therefore teaching techniques (such as use of music that stimulates prior memories) that reward a student's non-conscious system (attention, motivation, and appraisal/ affect) will leave more fuel (i.e. glucose) for the neural growth of long term memory.¹³⁰

Fischer, Yan and Steward developed the Co-Constructed Developmental Teaching Process using these insights about front-and back-end teaching. The first part of the process is framing, in which the teacher connects practices to their corresponding mind/brain functions and long term memory processes. The mind is goal-oriented and therefore the teacher is explicit about framing the learning event to conserve cognitive energy for later processing. For example, if the learning event were a trust-building exercise, the teacher would frame it by reminding the group to "pay attention to how you

¹²⁷ Schenck and Cruickshank, 82.

¹²⁸ Schenck and Cruickshank, 83, referencing studies by Cowan, 2005; Kimball and Holyak, 2000; and Saplosky, 2004.

¹²⁹ Schenck and Cruickshank, 85, referencing studies by Fischer, Yan and Steward, 2002; and Parzaile and Fischer, 1998.

¹³⁰ Schenck and Cruickshank, 86.

trust both yourself and others today.” Following the framing preparation step, the learning activity takes place. It should have “short, clear, attainable goals, rapid natural feedback and be within the students’ abilities, which facilitates motivation.” Rock climbing is an example of a learning activity: creating teachable moments where the facilitator can point back to the framing question (Can I do this?).

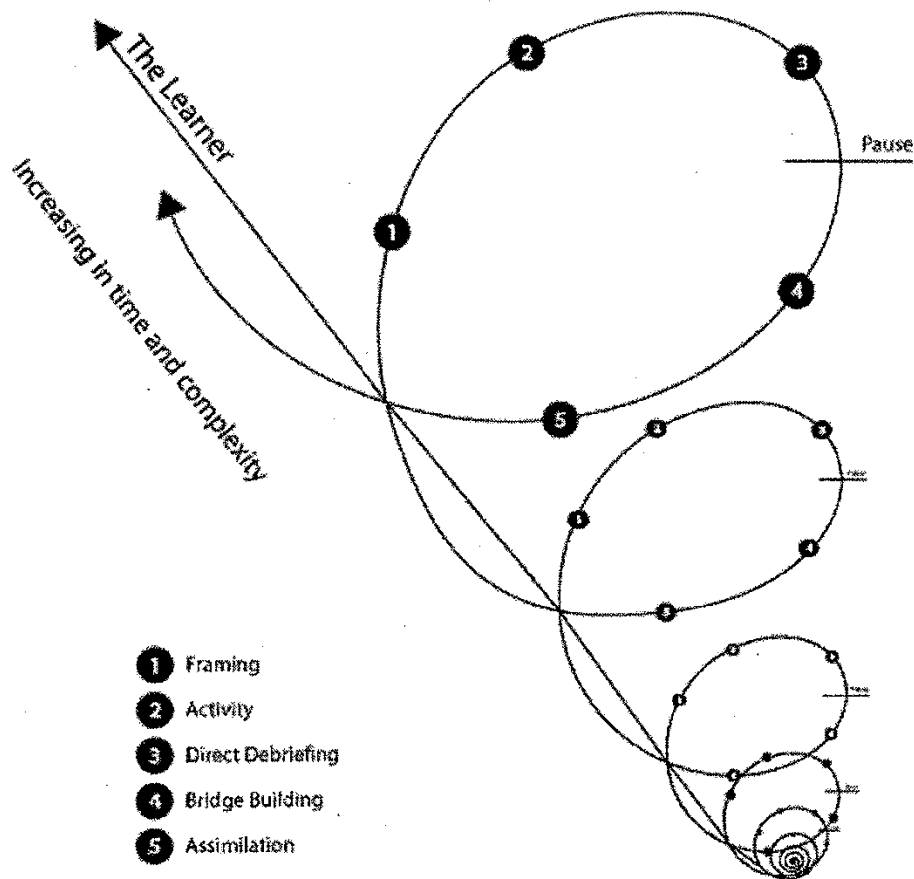


Figure 3.1 Co-constructive Developmental Teaching Theory¹³¹

¹³¹ Schenck and Cruickshank, 76.

The remaining parts of the learning process, a fractal-like cycle, consume more cognitive energy: debriefing, deliberate pause, bridge building, and assimilation. Debriefing double checks what students take away from the activity and what is still needed to reach the framing goal. An example would be, “when did you trust during this activity?” A deliberate pause phase is then necessary for the learner to reflect and personalize the significance of the experience and for its memory to stabilize. A pause could be a personal time or even a solo activity. Bridge building must be guided by the teacher. It takes the concepts encountered during the activity and extends them to new situations. “The newly formed attitude (which is really a newly established memory network) continues to stabilize as they are retrieved, discussed, explored and used.” As students become more proficient in the application of their new skills or knowledge and construct their own understanding, they increase their autonomy and become more self-directed.”¹³² The final phase, assimilation, is when the learner and the new knowledge are connected and become part of their autobiographical memory, is accomplished through a process known as transference.¹³³ Interconnected networks, such as the limbic system, determine salience and sort information, retaining some while ignoring other data, all at an unconscious level.¹³⁴ “The brain can only focus on one aspect of a lesson at once, leaving few resources to concurrently process and analyze the remaining information.

¹³² Schenck and Cruickshank, 88.

¹³³ Schenck and Cruickshank, 89. Transference is the influence that past learning has on new learning, and the degree to which the new learning will be useful in the learners’ future. Positive transfer aids, and negative transfer inhibits, the acquisition of new learning.

¹³⁴ Schenck and Cruickshank, 78.

Instructional methods that address salience are crucial, including review and guided reflection.”¹³⁵

A learner’s ability to retain information is also partially dependent on the type of teaching methods used. “By itself brain research cannot be used to support particular instructional practices. It can, however, be used to support particular psychological theories of learning, which in turn can be used to design more effective forms of instruction.”¹³⁶ The experiential learning, with its constructivist philosophical basis, has been well-respected in the research and is currently undergoing further development as more neuroscience research is discovered and applied to education.¹³⁷

One area that is of particular interest is the studies on creation of long term memory, as opposed to working memory. Various methods were studied to determine the percentage of new learning that students can recall after 24 hours have passed since the learning event occurred. Areas of verbal processing such as lecture or reading cause the lowest retention rates (5 to 10 percent), while verbal and visual processing produce better results, but significantly better retention (75 to 90 percent) is observed in those doing, teaching others, or using their new knowledge in practical ways.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Schenck and Cruickshank, 78.

¹³⁶ Richard Aldrich, “Neuroscience, Education and the Evolution of the Human Brain,” *History of Education* 42, no. 3 (2013): 401.

¹³⁷ Constructivism is a theory of learning stating that active learners use past experience and chunking to construct sense and meaning from new learning, thereby building larger conceptual schemes. <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/index.html>.

¹³⁸ Sousa, 95.

Despite this vast difference, lecture continues to be the most prevalent method used in most classroom and Sunday School settings.¹³⁹ Cooperative learning groups, such as small groups and missions-focused activities would offer a vast improvement in students' abilities to retain new information (75-90%), and thereby make meaning and encode that information into memories for long term storage and usage.

From these insights, we can see that the process of sanctification is a spiritual and emotional process aspects of which may now be physically observed and mapped in the brain. God has designed the brain to respond to various kinds of stimuli and to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit when our spirits are willing.¹⁴⁰ In fact, Newberg contends that are brains are “wired for faith” and that the more we engage in spiritual formation, the more we can essentially “re-wire” our brains to suppress, for example, the fear-producing reaction of the amygdala and enhance the frontal lobe area’s effect on social awareness and responsibility. With ongoing disciplines of prayer and Scripture reading, one’s brain changes and becomes more receptive and engaged with God. Repeated (operant) learning experiences serve to form protein synthesis which then alters and imprints the behaviors in ways that lead to long term behavioral change. In this way “faith provides a framework for living and for understanding the world and it alleviates a lot of the ontological anxiety many suffer with, and provides answers and a context for living. It is an interconnected meshwork for life.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Sousa, 95.

¹⁴⁰ Crosby, 26.

¹⁴¹ Crosby, 29.

The complexities of the component parts brain being discovered by neuroscientists, the knowledge of our brain as being intentionally wired for faith, and its capacity to be strengthened by devotional practices, is empowering for those concerned with spiritual formation in the church context.

This biblical framework of knowledge forms the basis for both the *kerygma* and the early forms of *catechesis* in the church. These knowledge frameworks consisted of words and deeds of Jesus taught in the context of living in relationships within the church community, modeling a way of life lived after Jesus and his disciples. The modern Sunday School movement of the last several centuries has lost this essential *kerygma* and *catechesis* in the context of mentoring in favor of more systemized, theoretically efficient, top-down (structural) educational models that resemble secular schools. The focus has been on content-mastery-as-memorization of doctrines with behavioral modification as a hoped-for by-product instead of a necessary accompaniment and/or grateful response for what God has done for us. The teaching responsibility has shifted from clergy to laity. The combined results have been a serious decline in biblical literacy across age levels and a loss of community-based education in favor of age-segregated classrooms, further separation between clergy and laity, and people who can recite the correct answers without actually fully knowing the truths of the faith. The shift from modern conceptions of knowledge to a postmodern relativistic ethos has further eroded shared meaning as knowledge in favor of subjective experiential interpretations and exacerbates lack of engagement with communities of faith.

In an effort to reform learning experiences, we can acquire some assistance from the fields of developmental psychology, educational theory, and cognitive neuroscience.

From developmental psychology we can understand how people acquire information and ideas that form the beliefs, knowledge, and emotions that lead to decision-making. Jesus' teaching as seen through the lens of educational theory, helps us understand how spiritual formation progresses from the inside out: challenging and transforming our deeply held beliefs and shifting our frames of reference. Cognitive neuroscience helps us further understand how our brains may be wired for memory making by seeking transformative moments when objective truths combine with subjective experiences to form and growth faith¹⁴² and how specific regions in the brain's nerves and circuits react, both physically and emotionally, to knowledge and stories of the faith. This emotional aspect of faith formation helps us understand the distinction between involvement, as mere participation, versus active attention and engagement, furthering our realization that our church's teaching needs to motivate and foster this deeper engagement in learners.

Sunday School, as conceived and executed in the modern period, was focused on teacher-delivered and learner-memorized predominately deductive teaching of doctrines with behavior modification as an expected and hoped-for by-product. The modeling of living and learning in the context of community through intentional long term relationships and serving one another seems to have been lost along the way. More inductive and abductive teaching needs to be added to the predominately deductive approach of most curricula.

Students and teachers should be encouraged to share life experiences in the context of mentoring relationships to reinforce cognitive or fact-based (constructivist) learning. A more desirable educational model is needed that is more personalized and

¹⁴² Loder, 190.

based upon deeper relationships than the typical Sunday School setting offers. This should include mentoring, worship, and serving experiences that allow learners to live out their faith with shared understanding of the significance and direction of God's leading, and which could, in turn, increase engagement and come closer to Jesus' model with the disciples. This meaning-making form of learning will, over time, re-wire (synaptic reorganization through protein activated neural networks) our brains for spiritual formation in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus as a teacher is in his own category and therefore is worthy of imitation, as Paul commends, but his methods cannot be completely replicated by humans. The mystery of his complete knowledge of all peoples' heart/mind/emotional conditions is beyond human capability. Yet his incarnational kinds of teaching including communal object lessons, parables, challenging questions, and mentor-like experiences of healing and evangelizing are instructive as ways of opening students' minds and growing their ability to learn and cooperate with the Holy Spirit in expanding their worldviews and examining their traditionally-held beliefs. Jesus is seen teaching individuals (the woman at the well and Nicodemus), small groups (the three disciples at the Transfiguration), and large groups (all of the disciples and the crowds at the Sermon on the Mount and the Feeding of the 5000). The Sunday School model of one-size-fits-all, top-down learning in a classroom-only setting falls short of the varied contexts in which transformational growth and true knowledge is formed. As we continue to partner with the Holy Spirit to know God and pass this knowledge to others as teaching, changes in the way we approach spiritual formation are greatly needed and long overdue.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Data and Methodology

Nature of the Research

This project was qualitative in nature. Participants and teachers of adult Sunday School were viewed as a cultural group. Therefore ethnography research was the selected research model. Ethnographers attempt to study a group of people “sharing a common culture to observe everyday behaviors (e.g., interactions, language, rituals) of the people in the group, with intent to identify cultural norms, beliefs, social structures, and other cultural patterns.”¹ This required the researcher to establish rapport with those being studied and to “engage in participant observation in order the she could gain insights about the culture that could not be obtained any other way.”² Although complete objectivity was not possible, given the researcher had attended Sunday School for many years herself in various churches, she attempted to be a silent observer in order to give the Sunday School group members’ voice³ to describe their experiences. Ethnography has its roots in cultural anthropology, and therefore “reflects the history, culture, and personal experiences of the researcher.”⁴

¹ Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 138.

² Leedy and Ormrod, 137.

³ Leedy and Ormrod, 139.

⁴ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 54.

Data Collection

Data was collected through onsite interviews and surveys. Questions for both the interviews and the surveys were constructed so that the participants' stories could be revealed in a "narrative, almost storytelling approach."⁵ Questions were designed to not assume that all classes would be structured or taught similarly; but instead looking for commonalities, themes, and patterns that emerged through coding the data from the interviews and surveys.

Structured interviews were conducted with Christian Education directors and/or pastors of seven baptistic churches with established adult Sunday Schools and with worship attendance of less than 200 people. To ensure a variety of perspectives and approaches to teaching baptistic methodology and content, the researcher chose churches representing three denominations: American Baptist, Southern Baptist, Converge Northeast (formerly Baptist General Conference), and two independent (non-denominational) congregations. The structured interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions which allowed individuals freedom to describe their setting's classes, overall church life, and joys and frustrations associated with adult education.

Interview Questions

The purpose of the interviews was to allow the leaders to describe their class in their own words, while also allowing the researcher to do some comparisons of format, teaching methods, content, and attendee descriptions across the seven churches. The onsite interviews took place with Christian Education directors or pastors from seven participating churches at their locations, giving the researcher the opportunity to observe

⁵ Creswell, 96.

the classroom environments. All interviews were done in person, recorded, and transcribed by the researcher. There were seven open-ended questions that focused on class demographics, curriculum, and methodology. The first question asked them to describe their current Sunday School offering in terms of who is teaching, their experience level and topics being taught. The second question asked about the attendees, including the percentage of worship attendees who also regularly attend Sunday School, their ages, genders, and spiritual maturity levels. The third question asked what percentage of class time was spent in lecture, discussion and other activities such as videos, music, maps and other visuals. The fourth question asked what percentage of the class time was spent teaching Bible facts and stories versus discussing application of scriptural truths into everyday living. The fifth question asked if there had been any missions or outreach activity done by the class. The sixth question asked if the leader thought that Sunday school is achieving its mission or objectives, and why or why not. The last question was open-ended in that it asked the leaders that if there were two or three things that they could change about their church's Sunday School offering, what would they be. The answers to the interview questions were organized and coded into an Excel spreadsheet to allow the researcher to view the answers side-by-side to identify both similarities among and differences between the church's leaders' descriptions (Appendix A).

Survey Questions

In order to get both teacher's and student's perspective and to compare the two to discern any disconnects between them, the researcher also conducted written surveys with eight to twelve adult Sunday School participants at each church. The surveys

included 10 questions, consisting of a mix of multiple choice, fill in the blank, and open-ended questions. The surveys were anonymous and confidential, and the informed consent form explained that the overall results and comments would be shared with the Christian Education director/pastor. In four of the seven churches, there were multiple adult education class offerings, requiring the researcher to categorize respondents' answers with the class attended. The purpose of the survey was to allow class attendees to describe their perception of the teachers' effectiveness, class content, memorable lessons, and impact on their own spiritual disciplines. In allowing the respondents to describe their class, the researcher could also see if there were obvious discrepancies between the teacher's impressions and those of their students regarding teaching methods or content. The survey consisted of ten open-ended questions that focused on class format, teaching style, and memorable lessons.

The researcher transcribed her interviews with the Christian education directors and pastors and compiled the participant responses in an Excel spreadsheet. This allowed the researcher to allow the researcher to both view the answers side-by-side to identify both similarities among and differences between the Sunday School attendees' responses within each church and across the seven churches and to garner commonalities that accurately describe the adult Sunday School culture across churches, as well as highlight differences that were unique to each church setting.

The first question was multiple choice and asked them to describe their class as either mostly teacher-led (lecture) or mostly discussion, or a combination of the two. It also contained a short fill in the blank question about how other teaching methods such as music, DVDs, maps or other visuals were used. The second question asked participants

what specific techniques the teacher uses to ensure comprehension and learning for the students. The third question was a yes/ no question asking if scripture memorization is a regular part of the class. The fourth question asked if the student would consider their teacher a role model or mentor for them, and why or why not. The fifth question asked if the lessons contain a practical application focus. The sixth question asked the respondents to comment on how what they study in Sunday School impacts their spiritual disciplines during the week. The seventh question asked if the class had studied their denominational distinctives. The eighth question asked them to name the topic that the class was studying at the time of the survey. The ninth question asked them to describe the most memorable lesson they had learned in Sunday School in the last six months. The tenth and final question was open ended and asked them to comment on anything else they wanted the researcher to know about their class. The answers to the survey questions were organized and coded into an Excel spreadsheet to allow the researcher to view the answers side-by-side to identify both similarities and differences among the classes. The researcher was also able to compare how the leaders described the class format and content to how the participants viewed the same (Appendix B).

Research Participants

The researcher interviewed three pastors and four Christian education directors with tenures ranging from eight months to 26 years. Church One was a historical and declining congregation of the Converge Northeast denomination in an inner city. Church Two was a suburban American Baptist church of 120 worship attendees in an upper-middle class town. Church Three was an established Southern Baptist Church in a rural community which the senior pastor has served for twenty-six years. It has an adult

Sunday School program which offered at least three class choices each quarter. Church Four was a Converge Northeast member, a church of 120 members, 21 percent of whom attend adult Sunday School. Their town is upper-middle class, with no racial or ethnic diversity in their congregation. Their pastor has been at the church eleven years and their Christian Education director has been in her position for fifteen years. The Fifth church was a small independent Baptist church in an upper-class coastal community. The pastor has served twenty-one years. His congregation was also dwindling and aging. The Sixth church was an American Baptist church on the edge of a major research university in an urban setting. There is significant racial and ethnic diversity in this congregation, although it too has dwindled in attendance in the last decade. The current pastor had served three years and the lay Christian education leaders were long term volunteers. The seventh church was different from the rest in almost all respects. It was a church plant which was eight months old. The pastor was bi-vocational and had only five families as members. Consequently, the worship, sermon and Bible study are all combined and multi-generational. The pastor referred to their church as “interactive teaching” with lots of discussion. All ages, parents and children, were together around tables; it had a house church feel to it.

Table 4.1 summarizes the demographics of the research participants and highlights the low percentage of adults who attend Sunday School.

Table 4.1 Research Demographics

	Church 1	Church 2	Church 3	Church 4	Church 5	Church 6	Church 7
denomination	Converge	ABC	SBC	Converge	Independent	ABC	Independent
Role of interviewee	Director of Christian Education	Director of Christian Education	Pastor	Director of Christian Education	Pastor	Volunteer teacher	Pastor
Pastor tenure	3 years	10 years	26 years	11 years	21 years	3 years	8 months
# in worship	100	120	200	120	50	120	20
# in Sunday school	16	16	30	25	12	20	20
% attendance	16%	13%	15%	21%	24%	16.66%	100%

Conclusion

The researcher developed a foundation for the research through a review of biblical themes related to knowledge and teaching. That foundation was further built upon with a literature review on pedagogy of teaching and neuroscience of learning. This foundation contributed to the types of questions and focus of questions used in both the interviews and surveys. Ethical considerations such as informed consent and confidentiality of information were included. Once the data was collected, the researcher organized and coded the research. The research revealed five themes: mission, attendance, commitment/engagement, format, and content.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to provide detailed church descriptions such that the ethnography of baptistic churches in Massachusetts was depicted. Churches were described in terms of demographics and pastor tenure by the researcher. Adult Sunday schools were described by both the pastors/teachers and the class participants in their own words. In this chapter, the research will discuss the data from church interviews and class surveys. Through the research, the following five themes emerged: mission, attendance, commitment/ engagement, format, and content.

Descriptions

Church One

Church One was a historical and declining congregation of the Converge Northeast denomination in an inner city. The once-active adult Sunday School program had declined from 70 participants to 16 in those three years, reflecting the church's overall declining numbers and aging demographic. The teacher was described by students as attentive, respectful of various viewpoints, knowledgeable and a good teacher and communicator. The teacher asked clarifying questions, used visuals about 20 percent of the time, taught content and application using personal examples 30 percent of the time, and facilitated discussion and application 50 percent. All respondents could identify what they had recently finished studying and state their most memorable recent lesson. Most of the attendees served in other ministries in the church, attended small groups during the week, and were described as more spiritually mature than those that chose not to attend

adult Sunday School. They reported increased spiritual disciplines of more intentional Scripture reading and prayer. The researcher had been mentoring two of the women in the class for over a year, and could see the results in their growth in knowledge and manner of interaction with the other students. At the time of the survey, the members of the class were looking to partner with another church committee in regularly visiting shut-ins and elderly as a group as a way of serving others. The researcher hoped to increase the mentoring component in the class, in hopes of increasing attendance and overall spiritual growth in the congregation.

Church Two

Church Two was a suburban American Baptist church of 120 worship attendees in an upper-middle class town. The percentage of members in adult Sunday School was 13 percent. There were two classes, one taught by a retired pastor comprised mostly of people at least 70 years old. They studied books of the Bible verse-by-verse for “as long as it takes” to complete the books. The second class was taught by a 40-year old seminary student with guidance and oversight from the senior pastor. The Christian Education director’s class had eight to fifteen regular attendees, ages 25-50. They have used DVD and discussion-based curricula and book studies like John Piper’s book, *Don’t Waste Your Life*. The director described those in her class as more spiritually mature than those in the congregation who do not attend Sunday School. Those who do attend also served in other ministries in the church. There was no mission or outreach component to either class, but the CE Director felt this would be a very valuable addition. The older class was 90 percent teacher-led and ten percent discussion with no visuals or handouts; while the younger class was 50 percent teacher led, 45 percent discussion, and five percent visuals

and other media usage. The older class was 90 percent Bible facts and stories and ten percent application to life; while the younger class described themselves as 50/50 percent. When asked what the director would like to see different about adult Sunday School, the CE Director described the program as feeling “stuck.” In clarifying this, there was no mobility or communication and sharing between classes; they ran parallel but don’t interact with or know each other well. She would like to see a shared mission component as an intergenerational cooperation opportunity, and was intrigued by the idea of a mentoring component.

Ten of eleven respondents from her class reported feeling that Sunday School had a positive impact on their spiritual disciplines at home during the week, and that scripture memorization was recommended but rarely done. They value practical application, saying “I wouldn’t come if it were not a part of the class” and that they really felt connected to others in the group: “I never leave wishing I had been somewhere else for that hour.” Five of the eleven respondents could not remember or articulate their most memorable lesson from the last six months, and eight of the eleven could not identify their denominational distinctives, and would eagerly welcome more teaching on this topic.

Church Three

Church Three was an established Southern Baptist Church in a rural community which the senior pastor has served for twenty-six years. They have a robust and highly organized adult Sunday School program, offering at least three class choices each quarter. The pastor was able to provide a handout listing classes going back to 1988 and a multi-page document listing the vision, mission and objectives of what he calls his *telios*

initiative (Appendix C). One class group is currently focused on prayer, another just finished an exegetical study of the Book of Revelation, and a third class is doing a book study on *My Heart: Christ's Home* by Robert Boyd Munger. The classes were taught by the pastor, elders in the church, and married couples with oversight from the pastor. They offered teacher training and spiritual gift assessment twice a year. They also offered all members classes in Baptist distinctives once a year. Attendees selected their class by topic and were therefore not divided by age or gender. Those that “self-select” into adult Sunday School (15% of the 200 members of the church) tended to be more spiritually mature, took discipleship and spiritual disciplines seriously, and serve in other ministries in the church. The church did have several missions and outreach projects, but none specifically associated with any of the adult Sunday School classes. The pastor reported that the classes are typically 60-70 percent teacher-led and 20-25 percent discussion format, with the remaining small percentages for visuals and other media like DVDs and music. They placed a high value on application of scripture to life, reporting 40 percent of their content is aimed this way; citing the book *Sticky Church* as a model. When asked if he believes the Sunday School is effective in meeting their goals, he paused and said,

That is a difficult question. It is clearly effective for those who regularly attend. They grow closer to Christ. They enjoy fellowship with one another and get to know each other better. But in the big picture of the church as a whole, systematic growth and discipleship as the objective, no, not yet. We tend to do a good job of conveying information, but people's engagement is still low.

In surveying the attendees of these classes, they confirmed the value of application of scripture to life: unanimously saying “yes”, “very important”, and “definitely part of every class.” All respondents also reported that their Sunday School participation increases the consistency and quality of their own spiritual disciplines at

home. But 50 percent of respondents could not remember or articulate either their denominational distinctives or the most memorable lesson for them personally over the prior six months.

Church Four

Church Four was a Converge Northeast church of 120 members, 21 percent of whom attend adult Sunday School. Their town was upper-middle class and the congregation was primarily Caucasian. Their pastor has been at the church eleven years, and their Christian Education director had been in her position for fifteen years. Their Sunday School was called “Family Bible School” and offered multiple class electives in six week intervals, often book studies with DVD accompaniment, but have also done exegetical studies of books of the Bible. Recent book studies have included Yancey’s book on prayer, Hybels’s book *Too Busy Not to Pray*, *The Best Yes* by Lisa TerKeurst, and *The Deeper Life* by Daniel Henderson. The CE Director described their model as “not a traditional model of Sunday School: instead the goal is wanting people to get themselves involved in their own spiritual growth.” Teaching on Spiritual Gifts happens once a year. The format was described as facilitation more than teaching and discussion as the primary mode of interaction (“we really like dialog”). The class was further described as 20 percent of class time was teacher-led, 60 percent discussion, and 20 percent to other visuals including DVDs, maps, handouts and object lessons. Approximately 30 percent of the time was teaching Bible facts and stories, while 70 percent was application to life, including sharing of personal stories and testimonies. When asked if she believed the Sunday School is achieving its mission, she paused and said,

It's a tough question. Yes, in that there is growth in Christ for those that attend. We see the fruit. But also, no, those who really need to grow aren't attending or bringing their kids. The church in general has too much going on: too many programs and offerings such that we are modelling busyness and doing over being in Christ.

The CE Director also reported that the six-week topical format was appealing to the members because it is a short-term, low-level commitment, but the negative tradeoff was that the shortened duration doesn't lend itself to the kind of relational bonding that would promote deeper friendships, shared service, or missions activity. When asked what she would like to see change about adult Sunday School, the response was a wish that the church did a more purposeful job of promoting the Sunday School, "instead of just presenting it as an option or a choice, but instead something vital to spiritual growth."

The members confirmed the CE director's assessments in their survey responses; they highly valued collaborative discussion and practical application of lessons. Eight of ten members surveyed could articulate denominational distinctives, while two would prefer a refresher class on them. Five of ten indicated that they would welcome more verse memorization to add to their personal spiritual disciplines. Seven of ten members could articulate the most memorable lesson to them, and all commented that they enjoy the variety of available choices in class topics. All respondents considered their teachers role models or potential mentors, but 70 percent mentioned that with the rotation of classes every six weeks, they don't get to spend enough time with their teachers.

Church Five

The fifth church was a small independent Baptist church in an upper-class coastal community. The pastor had served twenty-one years. His congregation was also dwindling and aging. Twelve of the 50 church attendees (24%) participated in the adult

Sunday School class. The pastor taught the class, preparing worksheets a week ahead of time, with readings and questions to be done each day in preparation for discussion in class on Sunday mornings. The pastor ran the class much like a school classroom, requesting that people raise their hand if they want to speak, adding, "It's just more orderly that way." It was reported that the participants memorize a verse a week. The class format was 50 percent teacher-led, 40 percent discussion, and ten percent other methods or activities (music, DVDs, object lessons, maps, visuals). The pastor expressed a preference for more discussion, but he admitted that he is unsure how to accomplish this, as the attendees are "predictable and stodgy". When the researcher asked him to unpack that more, he said they are conservative, older, fiercely independent denominationally, and have no worship band. The pastor estimated that 50 percent of the time is spent on teaching Bible facts and stories and 50 percent on personal application to life. When asked if he thought Sunday School was achieving its objectives, he answered:

Not sure how to answer that. Not sure that the objective of Sunday School is clear enough. In my own mind, my objective is to teach the Bible. So that is a 'yes' to your question. For those that attend. If the church's goal were to increase participation, the Sunday School is not doing that. "Prayer, Sunday School and worship are the things that help one grow in Christ. Period. For those that aren't availing themselves of those opportunities, how do they expect God to work in their lives?" Interacting with the Word and others in community is necessary for transformation.

When the class's participants were surveyed, ten of eleven respondents described the class as a combination of teacher-led and discussion, while one described it as only teacher-led. Application to life was always clear and explained well. The participants thought the pastor was well-prepared and asked good clarifying questions to ensure comprehension. All respondents indicated that attending class fuels their own spiritual disciplines at home, especially Bible reading and prayer. The class had also recently

completed a study of A. W. Tozer's book *The Pursuit of God*, and all but one of the eleven respondents could articulate a memorable lesson they'd learned.

There were two areas of disconnect between the pastor's perception of class and those who responded to the survey. The first area was that the pastor indicated that they were memorizing a verse a week; while only three of the eleven indicated that this was a requirement. This could mean that it was assigned but they did not do it, or that they were unclear this was expected of them. The second area of disconnect was that nine of the eleven could not articulate or remember learning the Baptist distinctives. The pastor thought that the teaching as part of membership class was reinforced in Sunday School yet the attendees did not agree or couldn't recall this teaching.

Church Six

The sixth church was an American Baptist church on the edge of a major research university in an urban setting. There was significant racial and ethnic diversity in this congregation, although it too has dwindled in attendance in the last decade. The current pastor had served three years and the lay Christian education leaders were long term volunteers. The church has 120 in worship and 20 (16.6%) of those attend adult Sunday School. The researcher interviewed the lay leader who leads their "Bibles and Bagels" class on Sunday mornings. The teacher was a 55 year old retired psychiatrist who had been a member of the church for over twenty years. The class was described as a "group-guided, discussion-based class." He responded that his perception of the class was 86% discussion, 4% teacher led. They recently studied the New Testament letters of Paul in chronological order. Responses showed 50 percent of the time was spent on reading and discussing the biblical letter, and 50 percent doing practical modern-day application to

their lives. The class attendees were mostly married couples aged 40 to 80.. The lack of formal seminary training of the leaders was an intentional decision by the group and the leaders considered themselves facilitators, not teachers. The pastor was aware of what they were studying, but rarely, if ever, attended. When asked “What results (spiritual growth or service to the church) have you observed in those that regularly attend”, he responded that this question had “never occurred to them”, saying that the attendees were “spiritually concerned, introspective, and not just social-issues-concerned. They were more aware of their spiritual life, and desired to have their spiritual life woven more into the rest of their lives” When asked, “Do you believe the Sunday School is achieving its mission/ objectives?” Again- they said that they had never considered evaluating Sunday School. “It just is- people just like coming and being together.” But when pressed, he said yes, he thinks those that come did know their Bibles and related well to one another. He admitted that they don’t really promote Sunday School to try to get more people to attend.

The class participants answered similarly to their teachers on most questions. Seven out of eleven respondents described the format as a combination of discussion and teacher-led, with the remaining four describing it as primarily discussion. They valued conversation highly, especially appreciating when there were opposing viewpoints in the room. All eleven emphatically answered that there was never an expectation about scripture memorization, with only one respondent adding that they believed it would be a good idea.

There was disagreement among the participants as to the extent of application to life in the class, with three responding positively and eight responding “no” or “not

enough.” Seven of the eleven could articulate the denomination’s distinctives. Six of the eleven respondents left the “most memorable lesson” question blank.

Church Seven

The seventh church was different from the rest in almost all respects. It was a church plant, was just eight months old, had a bi-vocational pastor, and had only five families as members. Consequently, the worship, sermon and Bible study were all combined and multi-generational. The group had just finished an eight-week series on the life of Abraham, and prior to that spent five weeks on the theme of amazing grace (i.e. “grace plus nothing”) in Galatians. The pastor described amazing growth in knowledge and depth of relationships because 100 percent of the congregation is reading, studying and worshipping together regularly. They viewed Sunday not as a unique experience, but an extension of their intentionally “doing life together” throughout the week.

He articulated their approach as “deep diving into scripture and what it means for life.” He estimated 55 percent discussion, 35 percent sermon/ teacher-led time, and ten percent with DVDs, music, and other visuals. He estimated 30 percent of the time was spent on teaching Bible facts and stories, while 70 percent was spent on application of scripture to life. They was very intentional about missions and shared, multi-generational family-based missions, both locally in regular soup kitchen and homeless shelter work, as well as internationally in Haiti recovery trips. He emphasized the importance of living out our faith no matter what our ages.

When asked if this model is achieving its mission or objectives, he answered an enthusiastic “yes!” He was highly influenced by the book *Intergenerational Christian*

Formation.¹ He adds, “We are a microcosm church but the results are visible. Not popular or snazzy, but real.” When he looked at and experienced discipleship in other settings, he was dissatisfied, saying, “This isn’t working. “I don’t want that product” (the church was trying to do one-size-fits-all teaching in the form of information transmission—and not even doing that well). This church was planted intentionally with the idea of deep study, “closer proximity touch” and more accountability. Relationships were built on trust, so that discussions were deeper, more real, and richer. The pastor reflected on how the presence of children contributed to the environment because the kids weren’t afraid to ask questions

The pastor stated that the goal for the church’s members to correlate experiences and Scripture with what is going on in people’s lives that week. An emphasis on spiritual formation in the home as key; Sunday School cannot be viewed as a replacement for teaching at home. Sunday School also can’t be viewed as an isolated experience (it’s where we go on Sundays) but rather should be viewed as an integrated part of their lives. The pastor articulated goals of authenticity and consistency, and felt they are being achieved.

When asked if there were two or three things that he would change, the pastor responded that he would like to help people not be afraid of giving a long answer and taking time from the group. He felt participants thought it was difficult to get away from the school-like feeling of the teacher looking for a short, pat answer. This overlap from secular school settings can prohibit deeper interaction and leads to uncertainty if they

¹ Holly Allen Catterton and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2012).

could feel shamed or attacked for expressing doubts/ fears/ different perspectives. The pastor felt that there are unasked questions but that the kids' presence there helps that some. He also would like to be better at making the "closer proximity touch" and interactive format more appealing and less intimidating: there were a few other families that came, but they found the deep and personal level of discussion and format of shared lives and accountability off-putting.

One participant described the class as a combination of teacher-led and discussion, including large screen with images, maps, scriptures and song lyrics. The participant described the teacher as encouraging questions and participation to ensure understanding and definitely emphasized memorizing scripture. Application was woven into all teaching, and the participant's personal spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, and tithing have become more consistent and meaningful as a result of attending class. The same participant considered the pastor both a role model and mentor. The denomination they affiliated with is the Evangelical Free Church, but they still considered themselves essentially independent. Her most memorable lesson was the inheritance we have through Abraham (Appendix D).

Analysis

In reviewing and coding the interview transcripts and the participants' survey responses, the researcher looked for patterns and themes related to the current practice and culture of adult Sunday School in the seven selected baptistic churches in Massachusetts. With the exception of Church seven, all other churches were unsure whether adult Sunday School is achieving its objectives. Most agreed that for the small percentage of attendees, Sunday School is effective in helping them grow spiritually, feel

connected to others in their churches, engage in other church activities, and practice consistent spiritual disciplines at home during the week. But all six churches acknowledge that there is much room for improvement in the percentage of attendees of the overall congregation, the depth of content and relationship building within individual classes, and observable spiritual growth in participants.

Mission

With the exception of churches two and three, most churches did not have a well-defined mission and vision statement for Sunday School. This became evident when the researcher asked if they felt that the Sunday School was achieving its mission and vision: because they could not define the mission, they had trouble measuring whether or not it was being achieved. All pastors and Christian educators who were interviewed, even those from churches two and three, felt that Sunday School was narrowly achieving its mission for those who attend but that the percentage of attendees is low, and therefore the church as a whole was not being positively impacted by Sunday School attendees' gifts and service. With the exception of church seven, there was no intentional missions/outreach focus of the adult Sunday School. However most of the teachers/pastors believed shared mission or service would be a good addition and way to build stronger relationships among attendees.

Attendance

Attendance in adult Sunday School as a percentage of overall worship attendance was low, ranging from 13 to 24 per cent in six of the seven churches. These churches had worship attendance ranges from 50 to 200. In Church Seven, worship and adult Sunday School were combined for the five families and therefore attendance was 100 percent of

the twenty church members. Regardless of size or denomination of the selected churches, adult Sunday School attendance is less than 25 percent. This indicates that fully three-quarters or more of the congregations' participants chose not to attend Sunday School. Almost all of those interviewed expressed a sincere desire that more people would attend so that they might have the opportunities to learn and grow and yet in almost all of the churches, there was not a concerted effort to attract more people or systematically encourage them to attend. Church Four's CE directors observed that classes were presented as only optional among the church's many programmatic choices, but not vital to members' spiritual growth was insightful. Even church three, which had the largest congregation in the study, offered three class choices per calendar year, and is the most organized and systematic in their approach to content and teacher training, only has fifteen per cent attendance. Those that attend very much appreciate and see the fruit in their own personal devotional lives and sense of service to the church's other ministries, and yet aren't sharing (evangelizing) their friends and fellow church members (or friends who are non-members) in ways that motivate others to attend with them.

Commitment/Engagement

An additional theme that emerged from the surveys and interviews was the low level of commitment and/or engagement that Sunday School engenders in its participants. It is seen as an option rather than necessary part of people's spiritual formation. There was very little to no verse memorization or homework for most classes. In fact, with the exception of Churches Two and Seven, there was little to no contact of members with each other during the week. The pastor's wife in Church Two sends an email during the week reminding them of prayer requests and attempting to help the group feel more

connected to one another. With the exception of Church seven, there was no shared service in the form of missions or outreach by any of the churches. One anecdote of exception was from Church four of a class who sent cards and called a woman who had been coming to their class regularly but had then faded away from church altogether. They expressed that they missed her, and it made the difference and she re-engaged, knowing that people cared about her and her family. It appeared that people liked coming, they enjoyed getting to know others somewhat better for one hour a week, but not more deeply, or for longer than the length of the class (which ranged from six weeks to three months). Much like going to a gym to do one's own personal workout, it seemed people came to Sunday School wanting to get spiritually fed and strengthened, and then went home to try to do spiritual formation on their own, in the form of Bible reading and prayer (as the spiritual disciplines mentioned most often in the surveys). In this way, Sunday School has become a source of information gathering, rather than a community of learning and growing in relationships.

Format

When describing the format of their class offerings in terms of lecture versus discussion, responses ranged from four percent lecture to 86 percent discussion (Church Six) to 90 percent lecture to ten percent discussion (Church Two). When asked the percentage of time spent teaching Bible facts and stories versus application to daily life, responses ranged from 30 percent Bible facts and stories to 70 percent application to life (Churches Four and Seven) to 90 percent Bible facts and stories to ten percent application to life (Church Two). Teachers reported using visuals or other teaching aids like paper handouts, maps or DVDs from zero to twenty percent of class time.

The format of the classes across the six established churches was predominantly discussion-based, and this was appealing to most attendees surveyed. They liked rotating modules of topics in classes that they only needed to “commit” to for six weeks to a few months. There was often a DVD and the teachers were attempting to ensure comprehension through asking clarifying questions, summarizing, and sharing personal stories of living out their faith (which was not unlike secular academic school teachers). The pastor of Church Five even had students raise their hands when they want to speak or answer a question, much like in academic school settings. A smaller minority gave homework questions, study suggestions, or verses to memorize on their own time. Church Seven’s pastor’s observation that Sunday School is largely seen as a Sunday-only place to go, being a self-contained unit not integrated with the rest of their lives, and attempted to be one-style-fits-all teaching that was ineffective and produced passivity the way academic schools did was seemingly, sadly, an accurate description.

Content

Church Three’s pastor’s observation that “we [as Sunday School teachers] do a good job conveying information, but engagement is still low” is true. The content of what was being studied was good. The teachers and pastors who lead were knowledgeable, prepared and committed to the task of providing opportunities for attendees to learn and grow. There were exegetical Bible studies and books of substance being read and discussed. Participants surveyed acknowledge that there was most often a clear and practical application component to the lessons. Many indicate that they would welcome more intentional (guided) teaching (rather than primarily group discussion), including on denominational distinctives and scripture memorization. Yet, more than 50 percent of all

survey respondents could not articulate the most memorable lesson or thing they have learned in the last six months. People were coming, they were listening, and yet it was not memorable for them to articulate in the survey. The lessons weren't sticking or being applied or if they were, they didn't seem compelling enough to them to be shared with friends and neighbors. Perhaps the things discussed were utilized in short-term memory for the one hour of class per week, but not transferred to long-term memory.

Interpretation

The study yielded a pessimistic portrait of adult Sunday School in the first six established baptistic churches in Massachusetts. There was an undefined or unclear vision or mission of what adult Sunday School was hoping to accomplish. There was very low (less than 25 percent) attendance when compared to the overall worship attendance of these churches, irrespective of their size. Those that attended seemed to come, gather information on a variety of good topics, listened to effective and experienced teachers that most considered role models or mentors. In addition, in most cases, those who attended did not intentionally interact with others from their class until the following Sunday morning. They reported enjoying the topics and their conversations, but often couldn't articulate the most memorable thing they had learned in the last six months. Their commitment was short-term and their engagement levels were low, and they have not invited their peers to attend with them. Churches presented adult Sunday School as an option but not a necessity and, in most cases, did not systematically promote or encourage others to attend. It seemed that the status quo of the somewhat closed, small-group atmosphere of most classes was not welcoming for new members to explore and

will not be a sustainable model for the long term unless additional members engage and became consistent participants.

The exception of the study was Church Seven, the small church with five families and only twenty members. They combined discipleship and worship, had clear mission and vision for discipleship, were intentionally interactive, intergenerational, and accountable to one another. They were consistent in service, scripture memorization, and application of their faith in all aspects of their lives. They intentionally spent time together as a group outside of the one hour of class on a Sunday morning. Teaching was done in a way that attempted to be more holistic and different than the secular school model of one-size-fits-all style teaching by teachers who primarily lecture to passive students absorbing cognitive information. Church Seven was the most positive in terms of four of the five themes of the research: mission, commitment/ engagement, format and content. However, even with clear vision, good content, good format, high commitment and engagement of members who apply truth to their lives and live out their faith consistently, the last theme of the research, attendance, was still low, and it has proven difficult to grow the church. The pastor reported observing that the commitment level and discussion depth were off-putting to some visiting families.

CHAPTER SIX: EVALUATION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, the researcher incorporated the summarized findings, evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the research process, and made recommendations as to further research needed. Adult Sunday school has been conducted in traditional ways for an extended period of time. As a result, church leaders will need to prayerfully consider any proposed changes while simultaneously demonstrating to their members the need for augmentation of this long-held tradition.

Evaluation

Creswell's Qualitative Research book reminds researchers that it is important to attempt to contextualize the research information they gather within a broader analytic framework, to critique the research process, and propose a redesign of the study.¹ The researcher acknowledges that the interviews conducted contained the lack of objectivity of situated knowers (pastors and Christian education directors) in the church settings. Those that are immersed in the Sunday School culture often do not have the objectivity to evaluate it. In this case because there was most often not a vision/mission statement to measure against; and also because baptistic churches by nature are independent and less concerned with how other churches are discipling their members. Even with the best of intentions, individuals in ministry want to believe that they are contributing positively to Christian discipleship, which might leave room for blind spots of weaknesses in the programs they administer and the classes they lead. The researcher also asked Sunday

¹ Creswell, 233-4.

School participants to self-evaluate and to evaluate teachers' effectiveness in the field of Christian Education which is essentially asking them for subjective opinions, as opposed to evaluations by more qualified experts in the field. In attempting to gather information about adult Sunday School as a culture group, the researcher also relied on descriptions of classes from the situated knowers, rather than being able to come in and observe the classroom dynamics in person. Finally, Christian formation itself does not lend itself to uncomplicated measurement. Progress in our walk with the Spirit is often a long-range goal, and not easily captured in a snap-shot. The question "Does attending class positively impact your own personal spiritual disciplines" invited subjective answers. Some progress is always hoped for, and people tend to want to look good when answering a survey, so they might report their responses more optimistically than realistically. If another researcher were to have conducted this same research with same people and the same questions, they would likely have collected the same answers, but the researcher was unsure whether the right questions were asked, asked in the appropriate level of detail, or if discipleship is able to be explained in qualitatively-measurable terms.

If the researcher were to redesign the research process, she would ask the teachers to video a typical class, so that she could make the determinations of how much time was spent teaching Bible facts and stories vs. personal application and how much time was teacher-led (lecture) vs. discussion. Side-by-side comparisons of videos of different setting's classes would provide more objectivity and would reflect the culture without having the researcher observe them and thereby potentially change the dynamics in the room. The researcher would also use her own church's setting as a test case for

evaluating the clarity and appropriateness of the questions; but not have her church as one of the members of the study itself, again for objectivity reasons. It might have also been interesting and helpful to get some of the pastors and Christian education directors together when creating the questions to glean what is important to them, rather than relying on the researcher's own curiosities and areas of interest.

Some strengths of research included a variety of sizes and denominations in the churches studied with varied pastor tenures. This variety provided a representative sample of adult Sunday school as it is practiced in baptistic churches in Massachusetts. The research also included both the teacher and student descriptions in their own words, allowing the researcher to accurately portray the similarities and differences among the group of churches studied. The ethnographic approach was advantageous in this research project because it enabled the researcher to study a group of people "sharing a common culture to observe everyday behaviors (e.g., interactions, language, rituals) of the people in the group, with intent to identify cultural norms, beliefs, social structures, and other cultural patterns."² Similar language was used by both interviewees and survey participants to describe the norms of their classes. Teaching and class discussions were the interactions being examined.

Discussion

Mission

From the biblical portion of the research project, the researcher demonstrated that knowledge is more than merely cognitive assent to propositional truths. In both the Old and New Testaments, knowledge is seen as a gift of God and a response to faith, and

² Leedy and Ormond, 138.

carries with it a stewardship responsibility. To know is more than to just believe; knowledge has an action component. This kind of knowledge means a disciple is motivated to act upon his or her knowledge in ways that glorify God; not to gain knowledge for its own sake or to keep it to oneself but rather to use it and to share it with others. Since Jesus is the personification of knowledge, the goal of discipleship should be to continue to gain knowledge such that as Jesus' disciples we become more and more a reflection of him. Discipleship implies following the teacher and learning from experiences shared with the teacher. This was the model of Jesus with his disciples.

From the literature review, the researcher traced the history of catechesis in the early church and through the early development of the Sunday School movement which initially had this type of teacher-student relationship. What began in the early church as a discipleship approach which mimicked the Jewish rabbi-student apprenticeship then morphed into catechesis done by church leaders who invested in close relationships with students over several years of instruction. In the more modern (Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries) approach to Sunday School, teaching was motivated by literacy concerns, delegated to lay leaders who were not necessarily seminary trained, and who modeled their classrooms after secular classrooms. This caused discipleship to become less about teaching out of a close relationship for the purpose of life transformation into a more impersonal, one-size-fits-all lecture-type teaching. Knowledge became less action-oriented and more about accumulating facts in order to remember the correct answers to perform well on tests. Knowledge became an end unto itself, rather than a means to an end of living a transformed life.

In the field research, six of the seven churches could not determine whether Sunday School was achieving its mission because none could articulate what that mission was supposed to be. There was no objective standard or identifiable mission statement for what Sunday School was trying to achieve. Without a goal to work towards, Sunday School appears to be far removed from the rabbi-disciple relationship or the catechesis-type instruction that had its goal as transformed living to honor God. The *Telios* Initiative of Church Three (Appendix C) was the exception; it was clearly articulated and goal-oriented.

Attendance

Historically baptistic churches historically utilized Sunday School as a specifically outreaching (church growth) objective, which gave way over time to denominational priorities and concerns and resulted in classes which became smaller, more insular, and less outwardly-focused or mission-oriented. The field research showed that Sunday School attendance in Baptist churches in Massachusetts had dwindled to very low levels (less than 25%), while church leaders have not intentionally promoted Sunday school as necessary for spiritual development. A majority of those that did participate wished that more people would attend, but did not invite their friends, either inside or outside the church. Both in the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, a lack of knowledge did not mean agnosticism or ignorance, but disobedience to God and a lack of covenant keeping. The Hebrew word *yada* is understood to mean “knowledge which is empirical and living, obtained by observation of the work of God, which in turn leads to an upright life before God” (Prov. 2:6, Eccl. 8:17). The Apostle Paul used the Greek word *aisthanomai* to link knowledge with

obedience to God and living an upright life.(Rom. 10:3, 1 Cor.14:38). In order to learn, attendance would be the minimum expectation; and yet the field research indicated that three-quarters of research participants in these churches were not attending Sunday School.

Commitment/Engagement

As demonstrated by Jesus with his followers and also with Paul and Timothy, to be a disciple is to follow after one's teacher in a way that demonstrates commitment. The disciple would observe the teacher in various settings over a long period of time to learn how to live in ways that mirror the teacher. The Holy Spirit's role as identified in John 14 is to help us to recall and to perceive the significance of (illuminate) all of the teachings of Jesus. The field research about Sunday School paints a very different picture: low commitment to short-duration classes taught by a rotating staff of lay leaders. Some classes were as short as six weeks. This timeframe would barely allow time for the teacher and students to begin to know one another, never mind enter into a disciple-making relationship. Learning has become an exercise in gathering information to take home and think about independently from the teacher. This dynamic of the group not being together consistently certainly diminishes the Holy Spirit's leading in their Christian formation as they are not in discussion with one another nor letting the Holy Spirit build community among the group. The research project's literature review of teaching techniques and cognitive neuroscience of learning demonstrated that active learning in the form of mentor-type teaching has a greater impact and results in better long term memory creation than simple teacher lecture or independent reading

techniques. Participants' low commitment and engagement levels lead to low levels of transformed lives.

Format

In the rabbinical model which in we observe Jesus as master teacher, teachers taught not only with words, but with actions that their students could model their own thinking and actions after. The field research revealed Sunday School's format of one hour classes once a week with little to no communication outside that class time did not promote the kind of teacher-learner relationships that lead to true discipleship and transformed lives. Sunday School classrooms resembled secular classrooms in format, which has led to teaching being concerned with morals and behavioral modification, and has diminished discussion, inquisitiveness of learners and replaced discipleship as relationship with discussion of opinions to pass the time. Little emphasis on outreach or service is part of Sunday School in the field research, with the exception of Church seven, Sunday School has reduced discipleship to a somewhat passive acquisition of information and has also become a more limited discussion among a continually diminishing number of fellow believers.

Content

Discipleship, as seen in Scripture, was a process woven into everyday life. Jesus taught using object lessons of items that they would come across in their travels. Jesus taught both didactically and experientially. Historically, discipleship in the era of the Didache was concerned with both the catechumen's knowledge and lifestyle. The teacher would engage in and share experiences with his/her students outside the classroom and integrate that learning into the scriptures being taught. Both of these types of teaching

involved bridge building of ideas, review of knowledge to ensure comprehension, and guided reflection by the teacher. Teaching techniques that stimulate connections in the neural networks in the brain construct memories that move from short term to long term memory. This enables the student to recall and use the information the next time he/she encounters it.

The field research in Sunday School in these churches revealed a lack of scripture memorization as a basic component of a disciple's curriculum. Over half of the classes focused on topical studies, using DVD's and discussion, rather than using Scripture as the content. Those classes that did have biblical content reported a disproportionate emphasis on stories without enough accompanying application to life teaching. About one third of respondents could not identify the topic currently being studied in their classes. A larger majority of students could not articulate the most memorable lesson they had learned in the last six months. A majority could also not recall teaching about denominational distinctives. Teaching is not happening in ways that are memorable nor overtly biblical, and therefore the information the students had learned was not being stored for future use. Information was being shared, but lives were not being transformed.

Recommendations

Adult Sunday School, as traditionally conducted in these seven churches in Massachusetts, needs adaptation. Pastors and Christian Education directors need to articulate a clear mission and vision for adult discipleship. In some cases, this will mean aligning the vision and mission of discipleship with the vision and mission of their church. In some cases, it might mean renaming the classes as small groups to better reflect a different level of expectation for participation, engagement, and accountability

of attendees. Many churches would benefit from tying together church membership with the expectation of consistent attendance in discipleship classes and corresponding spiritual disciplines at home. Classes should be taught by theologically and biblically literate teachers who are willing to build long term relationships, mentor, and hold class members accountable over longer periods of time. Class members should come to view one another as those that “do life together” during the week, rather than spending just one hour together on Sunday mornings. The content and format need to be elevated to active learning rather than primarily lecture and discussion, including visuals and scripture memorization. Rather than focusing topically or reading often from extra-biblical material, the entirety of the Bible should be systematically taught, with application a part of each class time. Some churches would benefit from teaching from a historical catechism; while others may not. It is clear that Sunday School, as traditionally conducted in these churches is an outdated model practiced by a dwindling group and is neither a church growth tool nor an effective discipleship model that is transforming lives. These types of enhancements to discipleship could be vital aspects of revitalization and long term health of the church.

CHAPTER SEVEN: APPLICATIONS

The researcher began the project with what she hoped was a holy discontent about the state of discipleship in churches in her home state of Massachusetts. She owes her salvation to the wonderful Sunday school teachers of her childhood and seeks to offer similar learning opportunities to all age groups within the churches she has served. It is distressing to her that she often sat in churches where people did not even bring their Bibles and seem content to read off the screen instead of searching the scriptures for themselves. She also observed adults in several church settings that attend Bible studies or Sunday School classes but have to look at the table of contents in the Bible to locate the passage being studied; seemingly personally unfamiliar with reading the Bible on their own.

The researcher's own experience matched the findings of several Barna Surveys about overall biblical literacy declining and declining numbers of believers in discipleship classes.¹ In a recent Barna Survey, 52 percent of church members thought their churches do a good job of helping them grow spiritually, while pastors were significantly more pessimistic, only one percent thought their own churches were doing a good job in that regard. People in their survey prefer spiritual formation happen either on their own (38%) or in a group (25%), while only 16 per cent said they would prefer more one-on-one teaching. The Barna survey revealed that just one third of Christian adults

¹ George Barna, "*The State of Discipleship*," study released December 4, 2015. https://barna.org/research/leaders-pastors/State-of-Discipleship_BU12-2-2015 (accessed December 4, 2015.)

report that their church recommends meeting with a mentor, one half publicly endorse studying the Bible within a group, and half recommend their members study the Bible independently at home during the week. From this we can infer that people express a preference for low-commitment and low- interaction learning opportunities and the churches are not challenging them to want and expect more depth and higher commitment levels.

In this research, six out of seven pastors thought that their churches were not adequately helping their members grow, and the same percentage lamented the very low (less than 25%) attendance and engagement rates of their members in adult Sunday School classes. Most pastors in this research reported that they did not have a clear mission or vision for adult Sunday School, they also wished that more of their members would attend a class, but very few recommended it from the pulpit. In addition, none of them expressed the expectation of regular spiritual disciplines and growth as part of their Sunday School classes. Almost all survey respondents expressed a desire for deeper relationships, more Bible content, and that scripture memorization and shared experiences like service/mission projects would help better bond them as a group. Nearly two-thirds of all respondents could not name their church's denominational distinctives, and almost all respondents could not articulate the most memorable lesson they'd learned in the last six months.

Based on both the Barna study and the researcher's own project research, the need for churches to be doing something different with adult discipleship is clear. Pastors and Christian Education leaders should focus on: defining clear mission for discipleship and tying that to expectations for members that they attend and engage in Sunday discipleship

classes, invest time in their own disciplines (prayer, scripture reading, etc.) during the week, and meet with a pastor or other spiritually mature mentor on a regular basis. The community aspect of formation should be stressed, while also allowing for one on one teaching to occur. Pastors and mentors should reexamine the content and format of their churches' classes and provide shared opportunities for learners to put their faith into action. Active learning experiences including scripture memorization, frequent repetition of key ideas, and shared service activities should be utilized to ensure comprehension. Teaching should be designed not toward the goal of short term memorization, but long-term integration with daily living. Learning experiences should be designed in ways that enable learners' brains to engage in transference from short term working memory to long term memory storage and usage. God has wired our brains to make connections on the neural network level, so information dumping in the form of lecture-only-based teaching should be avoided. Teaching and knowing should be active not passive, as was the case in both the Old and New Testaments; and should be in the context of ongoing long-term relationships between teachers/mentors and students. Short term and low-commitment level classes of six to ten weeks should be avoided. Relationship building that leads to accountability and transformation takes time. Learning for information gathering purposes, or as an end in itself, is ultimately idolatrous, and should therefore be avoided. Learning that leads to transformation toward Christlikeness and towards glorifying God should be the goals of churches' discipleship efforts. Church Three's *Telios* Initiative is a model to emulate.

Future Research

The researcher would like to encourage others in the church to build on the research insights in this project. Additional research comparing age-based classes vs. intergenerational classes would also be of interest. The long-held tradition of age- and gender-based classes might need to be reexamined in favor of cooperative learning among age groups. This researcher had hoped to study more about mentorship models used in other educational settings to see if any of those insights and applications could benefit the church. This ended up being beyond the manageable scope of this project.

Further research in the areas of neuroscience of learning is sorely needed. Curricula should be designed with both an awareness of and incorporation of neuroscience of learning strategies as an integral component. Tying together Hagberg and Guelich's stages of spiritual development with pedagogical techniques that incorporate how the brain is wired to learn and store long term memories would be beneficial to these churches, as well as the wider church as a whole. Additional research could also be conducted to link pedagogical techniques to learners with different learning styles or learning disabilities such as dyslexia and autism/Asperger's Syndrome. By understanding more about the brains of those with disabilities could serve to assist pastors and teachers with teaching techniques that benefit them and perhaps more mainstream learners as well.

Personal Growth

The researcher has seen God work in her own life and in the lives of those she has ministered with during the time of this research project. As a result of engaging in this research and discussing it with colleagues, friends, and church members, she is even more convinced of the central role that discipleship plays, both for individual spiritual

formation, and for the health and long-term growth of the church. When classes become insular or are taught in ways that communicate information but do not engage believers in living those principles out in their lives, the negative results are easily identifiable. Individuals become passive, unengaged and complacent in their personal spiritual disciplines, and churches may become stagnant or decline in both attendance and vitality. Conversations are more surface level as time is not allotted to building deeper relationships characterized by trust and accountability. Pastors and teachers that are potential mentors to help people spiritually mature become primarily pulpiteers and church managers. Passive learners do not “know” spiritual truths in the way the Old and New Testaments describe knowing: as personal transformation that leads to obedience and action to glorify God in words and deeds. When attendance in discipleship classes begins to decrease, this should serve as a warning sign that the church itself is beginning to decline or become more focused on maintenance tasks rather than evangelism or growth.

In the last few years, God has shown this to the researcher first-hand through ministry assignments in two declining churches. The first had diminished down to 12 people, most of whom were over 70 years of age. They loved their Bible, they loved being together, and they worshipped in a small chapel and gave generously toward missions. But their prior pastor had held onto too many traditional aspects of church life such that the church appealed only to those who had been members and done church that way for decades. The second congregation had a huge building that it owned and used to serve the inner city. There were many people in their 50s and 60s, and a few young families, but the connections were mostly historical ones: their families had attended that

church. The church could not attract new members, could not attract the 20-40 year old demographic, or reach out effectively to its ethnically diverse neighbors, again, primarily because it held too tightly to “how things used to be.” In both cases, adult discipleship consisted mostly of traditional Sunday School classes, taught in secular classroom style with a single teacher and passive listeners. Good biblical content was being communicated, and yet lives were not being transformed in ways that lead to personal evangelism and church growth. Preserving the status quo out of misguided nostalgia for days gone by made both churches less outwardly-focused and ultimately led to their declines.

When the researcher discussed the topic of reexamining adult Sunday School, she was surprised by the strong negative reactions. The model of traditional Sunday School that they have known has become entrenched in their hearts and minds as the only way to do discipleship. This attitude of “no change is needed” on the individual level translates into churches that are averse to change at the corporate level. This tells the researcher that there is a need to educate the congregations in order to gain their acceptance before making changes. The researcher was also surprised in the course of her research that Sunday School, especially in Southern Baptist churches in the Twentieth century, was considered primarily an evangelism tool, not primarily a teaching tool. The researcher had always experienced them as teaching classrooms that were inwardly-focused.

God also has given the researcher the opportunity to move geographically during the time of writing the thesis. She moved from Massachusetts to Kansas, to serve in a church that has very strong adult Sunday School classes. There are six classes with 15-20 attendees in each, which run for nine months of the year. The oldest members’ class just

celebrated their seventy-eighth year together as a class. They truly care for one another: sharing meals together regularly outside of Sunday morning, visiting one another and providing food when a family member is ill, and ultimately providing meals for the funerals for their members when they pass away. They have a more of a small group feel to them, and discipleship and accountability to one another is evident. There are a total of 90 adult Sunday School attendees in this church with regular worship attendance of 160, or 56% of the adults are regularly engaged in these classes. Two of the classes regularly engage in mission-related service projects as a class, and this is encouraging for the researcher to see.

The potential disadvantage of these classes is that not all the content is biblical; they prefer book studies and discussion over more in-depth content. Additionally, the groups have been together for many years, visitors and newcomers feel it is difficult to join and feel a part of their social group dynamic, making them inwardly-focused rather than evangelistic. Only one of the six classes has scripture memorization as a regular part of their class.

The researcher feels that she has become much more aware of classroom dynamics including curricula content, pedagogical techniques, and participants' learning preferences and styles, having analyzed and collated data from these churches. She is also much more aware of the potential power and influence on the overall health of a church, both for growth and for decline, which discipleship has. She has come to a new appreciation and awe about how complex God has made our brains, and how they have been designed to yearn for, learn about, and worship Him.

Although the researcher had hoped to construct recommendations for an Adult Sunday School model that would have positive and immediately observable results that could be implemented widely, she has become more aware of the entrenched and change-averse mindsets of many adults in these churches. The first step to promoting change is a recognition that the status quo is lacking, and education about this would need initially to come from pastors in the pulpits. The researcher has realized and become more deeply convinced that discipleship truly is a life-long effort of willingness to be open to the Holy Spirit's movement in her life, and in the lives of those she serves in the church. There are no short cuts or simplistic sets of instructions that can circumvent the need for intentional investment and discipline over time. Teaching in ways that transform lives is a long-term cooperative effort with the Holy Spirit, and can only be done in the context of a healthy church community. Churches that do not prioritize discipleship set themselves up for members who are spiritually apathetic, and ultimately those churches may decline over time. The researcher is passionate about both her own spiritual disciplines and serving her church in ways that encourages learners to be engaged and consistently growing in their knowledge of and love for God.

God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. Yet the New Testament has various descriptions of churches and how they were governed and believers were disciplined. Perhaps this is because God knows that humans tend to be creatures of habit that dislike change. If we were given one model, we would likely be tempted to perpetuate that model past its effectiveness. Instead, the author of Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a season to everything under heaven. Perhaps this includes our models of discipleship. The need for personal discipleship and teaching which leads to biblical

knowledge and transformed lives will never diminish this side of heaven; yet the models that teachers and churches use to help people grow likely need to change over time. The researcher will continue to partner with the Holy Spirit to teach in engaging ways, to know in the biblical sense, to challenge her learners to apply spiritual truths to their lives, to live out their faith in practical and God-honoring ways, and to continue to make disciples that look progressively more like Jesus over time.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS/CHRISTIAN EDUCATION DIRECTORS

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PASTORS/CHRISTIAN EDUCATION DIRECTORS

1. Describe your current adult Sunday School offering: what curricula/ topics are covered? Who is teaching or leading? Are there any requirements or expectations regarding experience or training for this role? What oversight from the pastors/elders/council is in place for the program?

2. Describe the composition of the class(es)

What percentage of you regular attendees participate in adult Sunday school

Gender(s)

Age group(s)

Spiritual maturity of the attendees

What results (spiritual growth or service to the church) have you observed in those that regularly attend?

3. Indicate what percentage (out of 100%) of the class time is given to each of the following methods:

___ Lecture (teacher-led)

___ Discussion

___ Other methods or activities (music, object lessons, maps, visuals)

4. Indicate what percentage (out of 100%) of the class time is given to each of the following:

Teaching Bible facts/stories _____

Application of Scripture to life _____

5. Describe what type of mission or outreach activity has been included in the class, if applicable?

6. Do you believe the Sunday school is achieving its mission/objectives? Why or why not?

7. If there were 2 or 3 things you could change about adult Sunday school as it is currently offered at your church, what would they be?

APPENDIX B
SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

APPENDIX B

SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

1. Describe a typical class format. (Choose one of the following):
 - a. Mostly teacher-led (lecture)
 - b. Mostly discussion
 - c. Combination of teacher-led and discussion
 - d. Comment on how other methods or activities are used (music, object lessons, maps, visuals):
2. What things does your teacher do to ensure comprehension and learning for you?
3. Comment on if scripture memorization is part of your class?
4. Do you consider your teacher(s) a role model or mentor in your Christian life? Why or why not?
5. Do the lessons contain practical application (how do I live this truth out in my daily life?)
6. Comment on how what you study in Sunday school impacts your personal spiritual disciplines at home? (scripture reading, prayer, tithing, journaling, solitude, worship)
7. Have you studied your denomination's distinctives? (what your church believes that might be different from churches in other denominations)
8. What topic is your class studying now, or just finished studying this spring?
9. Describe the most memorable lesson that you learned in Sunday school in the last 6 months?
10. Comment on anything else you would like the researcher to know about your adult Sunday school class.

APPENDIX C

TELIOS INITIATIVE OF CHURCH 3

APPENDIX C

TELIOS INITIATIVE OF CHURCH 3

IT IS OUR PRAYER AND COMMITMENT THAT THE FOLLOWING MISSION STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES WOULD BE REFLECTED IN THE OVERALL CULTURE, TEACHING, STRUCTURE AND PROGRAMING AT [CHURCH 3].

Our Mission: *[Church Three] exists by God's grace and for His glory to be a welcoming community fully devoted to knowing Jesus Christ and making Him known until He returns.*

Our Objectives:

To disciple all believers towards becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

To be a visible and involved presence in our community through which the gospel can be effectively and relevantly displayed and declared.

To move visitors and regular attenders to become contributing members to the life and ministries of our church.

To build a Spirit filled community that promotes the establishment and growth of healthy relationships through which mutual care and spiritual growth can occur.

To identify, equip, and empower servant leaders to minister in the church and in the world.

What is a Disciple of Jesus Christ?

1. One who walks in dependence upon, devotion to, and delight in Jesus Christ, resulting in greater conformity to His Character and commitment to His Cause.
2. A fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

Seven Life-Signs of a Maturing Disciple of Jesus

1. A Disciple demonstrates an ongoing delight and proficiency in studying, understanding and applying God's Word, the Bible, for total life transformation.

2. A Disciple lives in and is nourished by regular communion with God through prayer, worship and other spiritual disciplines.
3. A Disciple “hungers and thirsts after righteousness” and therefore continually draws upon the Spirit’s power to resist temptation, confess sin, and bear Christ-like fruit bound together and built upon love.
4. A Disciple engages and integrates all of life (family, work, church, school, finances, citizenship, etc.) under the lordship of Christ and His call to biblical integrity and servant-hood.
5. A Disciple embraces the call to Stewardship; joyfully and sacrificially giving to and living for God’s glory and His world-wide Kingdom work. (Time, Talent and Treasure.)
6. A Disciple recognizes the primacy of the church as the Body of Christ and demonstrates a commitment to see it mature and be a community in which and through which Christ is manifested.
7. A Disciple actively and intentionally lives in the world as an ambassador of Jesus Christ, reaching out to the lost, extending compassion to the needy and pursuing justice for the powerless and oppressed.

APPENDIX D

RESPONSES OF PASTORS/CHRISTIAN EDUCATION DIRECTORS

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RESPONSES OF PASTORS/CHRISTIAN EDUCATION DIRECTORS

	Church 1	Church 2	Church 3	Church 4
Denomination	Converge	ABC	SBC	Converge
Role	CE Director	CE Director	Pastor	CE Director
Pastor Tenure	3 Years	10 Years	26 Years	11 Years
Attendance				
# in Worship	100	120	200	120
# in Sunday School	16	16	30	25
% SS in Worship	16%	13%	15%	21%
Missions				
Missions/Outreach	None	None	None	None
SS Format				
Lecture	30%/70%	90%/50%	70	20
Discussion	50%/20%	10%/45%	20	60
Other Visual Aids	20%/10%	0%/5%	10	20
Content				
Bible Facts/Stories	50%/80%	90%/50%	60	30
Application to Life	50%/20%	10%/50%	40	70
Achieve Objective?	Yes & No	Yes & No	Yes & No	Yes & No
	Church 5	Church 6	Church 7	
Denomination	Independent	ABC	Independent	
Role	Pastor	Adult SS Teacher	Pastor	
Pastor Tenure	21 Years	3 Years	8 Months	
Attendance				
# in Worship	50	120	20	
# in Sunday School	12	20	20	
% SS in Worship	24%	16%	100%	
Missions				
Missions/Outreach	None	None	Consistent	
SS Format				
Lecture	50	4	35	
Discussion	40	86	55	
Other Visual Aids	10	10	10	
Content				
Bible Facts/Stories	50	50	30	
Application to Life	50	50	70	
Achieve Objective?	Yes & No	Yes & No	Yes!	

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