

ABSTRACT

Introducing Small Groups to the Concept and Process of Spiritual Formation by Utilizing the Practice of *Lectio Divina* as a Model

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The impact of Christendom on American life and culture is evident in the vast numbers of churches religious institutions, and denominational entities whose influence is apparent in activities ranging from healthcare to education. Following the methods of the industrial revolution, Christianity established and promoted itself through the creation of organizations, systems, and programs. While invaluable in developing and growing the reach and influence of Christianity, this legacy has been criticized by those who raise questions about loyalty to institutions in today's post-modern era. In addition, some practitioners within the church recognize an inherent emphasis on group uniformity over personal spiritual formation in it. Reactions against organizational Christendom range from disaffiliating with Christianity altogether, to reinventing the faith in a way that seems to be detached from its historical expressions. This project contended that these reactions may overlook important commitments to personal spiritual formation within historical Christianity, and that such an emphasis might provide a balance of ministerial

focus in which communal Christian activity springs from the formation of Christlike character. Thus, the focus of this project was not a reinventing or abandoning of established forms, but rather a recovery and renewal of spiritual formation for individuals in Christian community. It emphasized spiritual formation due to its intrinsic connection in shaping Christian character and behavior, and community in recognition that God can be experienced physically and uniquely in such a setting. The project did this by providing participants of a small group with instruction on historic Christian spiritual practices, and interactive group engagement over the course of several sessions in the practice of *lectio divina*. Reflection on God's presence and activity within the group was facilitated through guided journaling and group sharing. The research of this project sought to determine how providing exposure to Christian spiritual practices/disciplines affected a group's individual and communal awareness of and response to God, as perceived by themselves and the researcher through such activities as reading the Bible, interpreting life-events, following Jesus' example, and listening and responding to others.

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of Spiritual Formation by Utilizing the Practice
of *Lectio Divina* as a Model

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but rather, consistently challenged me toward a greater degree of clarity and specificity in sharing my own thoughts and understandings, especially regarding the role of spiritual formation in this project.

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DEDICATION

To Kenneth Ray Ballard (“Big Paw”), a sinner saved by grace in the eleventh hour, yet used by God in the calling and shaping of a minister throughout his life.

CHAPTER ONE

Statement of the Problem

Introduction

A need was identified for the small group ministry of Eastwood Baptist Church in Gatesville, Texas to deepen its awareness of God through prioritizing Christian spiritual formation in its regular meetings. As a church founded in 1953 in the “Bible-belt” of the United States, Eastwood emphasized numerical growth through uniform evangelistic strategies and group assimilation within demographically driven educational programs. These methods have largely been influenced by the culture of modernity and the institutionalism that went with it. While this movement made a form of Christianity accessible to large populations, it emphasized structures and methods over spiritual formation as religion established itself as another institution among many. The purpose of this project has been to provide a formational process for small group members that resulted in an increased communal awareness of God’s presence and effort to respond to his promptings. Practically, the project addressed the need for spiritual formation among small group members by providing exposure to a Christian practice called *lectio divina*. The research of this project sought to determine the effect that exposure to *lectio divina* had on the small group ministry of Eastwood Baptist Church.

Definitions

Recognizing that this project dealt with the seemingly subjective subject matter of spirituality and that it utilized terms that may not be universally understood or agreed upon, this section has set forth some foundational understandings under which the project

proceeded. **Spirituality**, in and of itself, carries a vague connotation with infinite possibilities for meaning dependent upon one's experience and assumptions. In popular culture, the term is increasingly used to differentiate between dogmatic religious expressions and others that are outside of traditional religious structures and methods.¹ In this sense, spirituality can be tediously subjective, as it can include elements of self-help advice having little or nothing to do with God or any explicit understanding of him, to a hodge-podge of religious practices and convictions that traditionally had no connection to each other. John Drane summarizes this wide view of spirituality as being specifically concerned with elements of lifestyle, discipline, and/or experience.² Howard Rice further narrows Drane's categories by describing effort exerted toward them as centrally being concerned with "the process of searching for a vital relationship to God."³ While this project ultimately affirmed the latter assessment, it also recognized an important truth in the former: "at its heart, [spirituality] is born out of our deepest energies and our most genuine inner desires."⁴ Due to this understanding, the project focused on helping people in Christian community recognize and embrace the spirituality within their own Christian heritage, as well as learning from the wisdom of others within the broader stream of Christianity.

The primary way that spirituality was cultivated in the project was in reference to the process of **spiritual formation**. While various understandings of this concept have

¹ John Drane, *Do Christians Know how to be Spiritual?: The Rise of New Spirituality and the Mission of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2005), 9.

² *Ibid.*, 60.

³ Howard Rice, *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998), 41.

⁴ Angela H. Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 26.

increased with its popularity in Christianity in recent decades due in part to the writings of Dallas Willard, the researcher affirmed along with him that at its core, spiritual formation is simply “the process by which the human spirit or will is given a definite ‘form’ or character.”⁵ This is something that happens to all, whether or not any explicit attention is given to the process. Thus, one of the main goals of this project was the facilitation of a distinctively Christian spiritual formation, which “refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”⁶ “Spirit-driven” in this instance and “Spirit” in all occurrences where the word begins with a capital letter and is simultaneously not the first word in a sentence refers to the Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit, and should not be confused with the **heart/spirit/will**.⁷ The heart/spirit/will is what is formed in the process of spiritual formation by the Holy Spirit. These three words may be used to refer to different aspects of the same inward faculty in a person: 1) “will” refers to its power to initiate and create; 2) “spirit” refers to its basic nature as distinct and independent from the physical realm; and 3) “heart” refers to its status as the functioning core of the person.⁸

Recognizing what is formed in the process of spiritual formation and its various roles ultimately culminates in the goal of **character formation**. To simply understand

⁵ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 19. See “Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation” in Chapter 2 for elaboration.

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ See “The Holy Spirit and the Church” in Chapter 2 for specific theological treatment of the Holy Spirit.

⁸ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 33-34. See “The Heart, Spirit, and Will as Central” in Chapter 2 for elaboration.

this as referring to outward behavior, no matter how virtuous, ignores this inward process and its foci mentioned above. While the goal of spiritual formation is character formation, which was measured in this project by actions, attitudes, thoughts, desires, etc. that displayed **Christlikeness**, “external manifestation of ‘Christlikeness’ is not . . . the focus of the process; and when it is made the main emphasis, the process will certainly be defeated, falling into deadening legalism and pointless parochialism.”⁹ As a result, being formed into Christlikeness must be understood not merely as imitation, but as transformation. Consequently, this project encouraged patterning one’s life after Jesus’ example and teaching that acknowledged limitations and shortcomings in doing so, having proceeded under the assumption that this posture enables one to receive the transforming grace ultimately responsible for transformation to Christlikeness.¹⁰

Before describing how spiritual formation will occur, it must be nuanced from a related concept known in the Christian tradition as “**discipleship**,” understood as patterning one’s life after Christ so that a person obeys all that he has commanded.¹¹ Dallas Willard explained that the need for an emphasis on spiritual formation has arisen due to contemporary understandings of discipleship that omit character formation. Rather than promoting an obedience to Christ that comes as a result of being transformed by his Spirit, discipleship has too often encouraged behavior modification centered on willpower and effort.¹² Thus, in this sense, it could be said that spiritual formation is what

⁹ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 23.

¹⁰ James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 43.

¹¹ Alan Andrews and Christopher Morton, “The journey of Tact” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, Alan Andrews, ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 19-20.

makes the Christian behavior associated with discipleship possible; of course, this would not need saying had contemporary discipleship consistently retained the emphasis on character formation inherent in Christ's original call to "follow me" (Matt 9:9; Mk 2:14; Lk 9:59; Jn 1:43; 21:19).¹³

Participating in the process of spiritual formation in this project was understood as occurring through **spiritual disciplines/practices**.¹⁴ While recognizing the impossibility of compiling an exhaustive list of every spiritual discipline that has been engaged in throughout Christian history, this project recognized the thirteen classical disciplines Richard Foster covered in *Celebration of Discipline* as foundational in the field.¹⁵ While it did not deal with every discipline he covered or assert all he assumes, it affirmed his understanding of the disciplines as a means of placing one's self before God so that he can affect transformation.¹⁶ Thus, the emphasized disciplines in the project had the nuanced goal of affirming the active and individually unique human role alongside and submissive to God's role of forming one's character into Christlikeness.¹⁷ Beyond this

¹² Agnieszka Tennant, "The Making of the Christian: Richard J. Foster and Dallas Willard on the Difference between Discipleship and Spiritual Formation" in *Christianity Today* 49, no. 10 (2005): 42

¹³ In the interest of brevity and simplicity, discipleship was not discussed at length in this project; however, let it be understood that an emphasis on spiritual formation was not intended to replace or modify this concept or its goal, but rather to ensure that discipleship is possible and enable its facilitation.

¹⁴ See "The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Spiritual Formation" in Chapter 1 for a theological explanation of this relationship.

¹⁵ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), v. These include: the inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, and study); the outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission, and service); and the corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, and celebration).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷ Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 19. See "The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Spiritual Formation" in Chapter 2 for elaboration on this relationship.

utilitarian impact, it must also be stated that the disciplines are at the core of being relationally connected to God. Engagement with them can be likened to a “transforming friendship” where people “meet and dwell with Jesus and his Father in the disciplines for the spiritual life.”¹⁸

Spiritual disciplines in the project were practiced in a combined form in an exercise called *lectio divina* that specifically included silence, solitude, meditation, listening, and responding. *Lectio divina* literally means “divine reading” and a form of the practice can be traced back to Benedict of Nursia (480-547). Benedictine culture treated the individual disciplines of reading, meditation, praying, and contemplation upon scripture as an inseparable whole, but over time Christian tradition began to emphasize the individual components of the practice as well.¹⁹ This project adopted a “both/and” approach that emphasized the Benedictine form of *lectio divina* in practice that proceeded an educational introduction which emphasized the individual disciplines contained in it as worthwhile practices in their own right.²⁰

An elevated view of Christian **scripture** is a key dimension of the practice of *lectio divina* and the individual disciplines contained in it. While the word scripture, in and of itself, might refer to the writings of various volumes in some settings, it was confined in this project to refer specifically to the Bible. Echoing the first and last sentences on the topic in the Baptist Faith and Message (1963), this project affirmed that “the Holy Bible was written by [people] divinely inspired and is the record of God’s

¹⁸ Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, xi.

¹⁹ James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2012), 19.

²⁰ See “Description of Intervention” in Chapter 3 for elaboration.

revelation of Himself to [mankind]” and that “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.”²¹ This statement was important to the overall purpose of this project which upheld the conviction that awareness of God’s presence must be anchored in who he has revealed himself to be, and responding to his promptings cannot be done apart from the person and work of Jesus Christ.²²

Finally, this section would be remiss not to clarify the communal emphasis in which the project took place. Indeed, it was the conviction of the researcher that any understanding of the previous terms apart from **community** is incomplete. Community is difficult to define because the way it is experienced today is different from a century ago due to shifts in population and technological advances. Robert Wuthnow highlights this distinction by noting that even though “most people still have close friends and many of these friends live in the same community . . . genuine community entails more than simply having friends in the same zip code.”²³ While not exhaustive, he notes that it could include discussing cherished values, aiding/supporting one another in the midst of addictions and dysfunctional families, and providing mentorship integral to the formation of one’s core identity.²⁴ Theresa Latini elaborates by identifying three broad categories

²¹ Southern Baptist Convention, “Baptist Faith and Message, 1963,” Statement of Faith, accessed Jan. 19, 2017, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfmcomparison.asp>.

²² See “Theological Reflections on Scripture” in Chapter 2 for a theological treatment of scripture.

²³ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 33-35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

previously influenced by and implicit of community that were lost in the cultural shift to and through modernity: intimacy, self-identity, and connection to religious tradition.²⁵

This project upheld these concrete ideals of community, and at the same time affirmed its natural and intrinsic existence in the midst of human relationships, no matter how unrealized or invisible it might be perceived. As such, it involved the individual wills of people, with the potential of realizing their collective existence and corporate will.²⁶ It is in such a setting that spiritual formation can occur most fully and affect change most deeply. James Wilhoit notes that “people change most readily when they are in environments that foster change as they learn to live out their unique communal calling.”²⁷ In an attempt to facilitate recognition of the full potential of community, this project took place within a **small group** of Eastwood Baptist Church. Wuthnow refers to small groups as a “movement” responding to the shifts brought about from modernity mentioned above. Seen in this way, small groups can include a wide variety of groups ranging from support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, to numerous kinds of church-affiliated groups that may or may not actually meet within a church.²⁸ In *Building a Church of Small Groups*, Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson detail a more narrowed understanding of small groups as existing within the church as they describe a plan for

²⁵ Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 20-25.

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 1, Clifford J. Green, ed., Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 73-79. For more on how community functions with the heart/spirit/will of people see “The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation” in chapter 2.

²⁷ Wilhoit, 184.

²⁸ Wuthnow, 1-6.

administering numerous kinds of groups with various goals and functions under a common infrastructure.²⁹ While recognizing the influence of the overall small group movement on the church and the benefits of allowing it to guide overall organization of various groups within it, the small groups referenced in this project were understood as those meeting in homes of members for the purpose of **spiritual guidance** – “a ministry of companionship in which Christians support one another in their Christian formation by helping each other to notice God’s presence and activity in their lives.”³⁰ Small group community is essential to this kind of formation as it provides a tangible expression of the way God relates to people in the process. As members trust themselves to one another in a mutual relationship of love and care, they open themselves to be affected and changed by God’s grace in one another.³¹

Context

Eastwood Baptist Church is a 64-year-old congregation with an average worship attendance of 120 located in the small, Central Texas town of Gatesville. As one of the many traditional churches that dot the landscape, it is steeped in the revivalism that dominated Southern Baptist life throughout the twentieth century and has a history of emphasizing individual conversion over spiritual formation. The previous proliferation of denominational programs led the church to prioritize programmatic participation in things like standard Bible study and educational classes, giving initiatives, and Christian

²⁹ Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups: A Place where Nobody Stands Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 182-186.

³⁰ Reed, 8.

³¹ Bill Thrall and Bruce McNicol, “Communities of Grace” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, Alan Andrews, ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 78-80.

mission education and service, disproportionately to the more formational emphases of character formation and attention to Christlikeness. The decline of such denominational participation has led some in Gatesville to create new “non-denominational” churches that seek to implement better programs and methods than those deemed outdated, or to push for the adoption of similar improvements in their traditional congregations. Others at Eastwood and traditional churches in the area have become largely disengaged from the programmatic emphases of their congregations, while continuing to attend nominally when convenient. This has not only created a disjunction between people’s actions and faith, but also a loss of Christian community that was previously prioritized.

Consumerist Spirituality

The age of modernity can roughly be thought of as corresponding with the rise and acceptance of modern science in which the possibility of being certain about any testable hypothesis became viable.³² With this eventually came expert “systems” or institutions such as law, medicine, technology, mechanics, finances, psychology, etc. that increased the possibilities of and dependence upon themselves by society.³³ While the good from such institutionalism cannot be denied, such tragedies as war, terrorism, and climate change seem to indicate not only that modern institutions cannot solve all problems, but can in fact, contribute to them and create their own. Drane claims it is commonly felt that Western institutions in general have denied their core values, by being

³² Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 27.

³³ Latini, 14.

more concerned about structures than people.³⁴ Religion (especially Christianity) has traditionally been recognized as part of the Western institutional establishment and is therefore treated with the same suspicions as others.³⁵ The spirituality in the context described above is an extrapolation of how individuals can respond as a part this dynamic. While some press further into old religious systems and others create new ones or eschew them altogether, the overall response is one motivated by a perceived lack of meaning and spiritual depth in traditional religious experiences. This spiritual searching creates an openness to experiencing God in whatever way(s) might prove effective and satisfying, with little regard for classical doctrine, theology, or practice.³⁶ The status that religious officials previously had as authoritative “experts” in their field has been lost, giving people the freedom to look to themselves as a spiritual authority. In a society becoming mistrustful of its institutions and its experts, but lacking a replacement for the reliance it has grown accustomed to expecting from them, the possibility of personal frustration and crisis looms at large as the church ceases to be a consistent reminder of God’s presence to people.³⁷

In her research involving six congregations demonstrating a renewed interest and practice of spiritual guidance, Angela Reed asserts that one of the most profound changes participants report is a deepened awareness of God in their everyday lives.³⁸ Latini

³⁴ Drane, 12-13.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Rice, 40-41.

³⁷ Latini, 14-15.

³⁸ Reed, 69. In determining this, Reed utilized a “best practices approach” in the tradition of Diana Butler Bass where criteria for congregations included in the study necessitated having had a trained person

provides evidence for this in the context of her investigation of “well-developed” small groups where she notes a common tendency of all of them to in some way foster a sense of spiritual connection to God for individuals that was otherwise lacking in other forms of church engagement and individual religious devotion.³⁹ Integral in doing this was the communal practice of spiritual disciplines in a way that helped people recognize their identities and experiences as having significance to God and their awareness of him.

Latini uses the term “ontological security” to describe this and recognizes its presence in small groups in her research through the expressed abilities to forgive, feel better about, and be more open and honest with one’s self.⁴⁰ It must be cautioned, however, that neither emphasizing spiritual guidance nor the utilization of small groups in these ways guarantee the facilitation of a uniquely Christian spiritual formation. In Wuthnow’s national survey of the small group movement’s effect on religion and community, he found that while small group participants reported having a deepened faith and sense of closeness to God, this faith was not necessarily based on a Christian understanding of God and “closeness” referred to an intimate experience of God’s care for one’s personal problems.⁴¹ Thus, before the project addressed the stated problem, a distinctly Christian

establish a ministry of spiritual guidance in some form that had involved at least four individuals for a minimum of two years.

³⁹ Latini defines “well-developed” small groups as being: 1) guided by mission statements; 2) supported through regular leadership training; and 3) embedded within the congregation’s overall ministry design. While addressing these aspects go beyond the scope of this project, it affirms their overall value in the administration of small groups ministry within the church. At the same time, it is worth noting that the implementation of such ideals does not automatically address the problem identified and addressed by this project.

⁴⁰ Latini, 69-71.

⁴¹ Wuthnow, 233-239.

understanding of spiritual formation needed articulating, along with a biblical foundation that affirmed the viability of such a process.⁴²

Disjunction of Beliefs and Action

The pressure to prove the validity of the struggle for people to hold what they believe and how they live congruently was hardly felt by the researcher. Indeed, the existence and frequent use of such words as “hypocrite” to describe those understood as failing at this demonstrates a general awareness and observation of the phenomenon. Amy Plantinga Pauw points to the biblical story of Jonah as a case study that recognizes the existence of this struggle that dates back to ancient times: “Jonah’s beliefs and practices exhibit the kind of gaps that religious believers find all too familiar: he holds admirable beliefs, but struggles mightily with how to live them out.”⁴³ To be sure, these struggles are complex and involve more than the lack of individual willpower or what one might consider “real” or “superior” faith. The problem she identifies can be summed up with the assertion that Christian beliefs and behavior are not “symmetrical;” that is, either one may shape the other, but neither one is constitutive of the other.⁴⁴

An ideal corrective might be something like what Christine D. Pohl describes occurring in the Open Door Community in Atlanta, an intentional, interdenominational Christian community that seeks to model Christian hospitality to and with anyone

⁴² For a Christian understanding of spiritual formation, see “Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation” in Chapter 2. For a biblical foundation for it, see “An Exegesis of Galatians 4:19-20 (Spiritual Formation)” in the same chapter.

⁴³ Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Attending to Gaps between Beliefs and Practices” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

needing or seeking to be included in such a practice. Participants range from part-time volunteers from churches, local schools, and social agencies, to full-time homeless residents. Regardless of each one's specific status, all take turns serving one another food, praying for and with one another, reading and commenting on scripture, and worshipping together. As the practice of hospitality is carried out in the midst of the community, it is also reinforced during times of group Bible study and worship.⁴⁵ While Pohl admits that this seems like an impossible ideal for an ordinary church to mimic, she insists that it is precisely because of the broad inclusion of individuals from the larger body of Christ that the Open Door Community is possible. In this way, it relies on the formation in hospitality that volunteers have received in other settings, making it "one community among many communities."⁴⁶

It is exactly this kind of fusion of beliefs and actions that Latini points to as being characteristic of her "well-developed" small groups. In each of them, engaging with others in spiritual practices prompted an awareness of human need and a recognition of God's ministry to persons outside the church. This tangibly resulted in such activities as serving meals at homeless shelters, purchasing and delivering Christmas gifts to families within their communities, hosting a community service day, and visiting hospitals and nursing homes.⁴⁷ Wuthnow notes that part of the impetus in this dynamic comes from the care modeled within small groups, of which members in his study connected to a

⁴⁵ Christina D. Pohl, "A Community's Practice of Hospitality: The Interdependence of Practices and of Communities" in *Practicing Theology*, 121-123.

⁴⁶ Pohl, 128-130.

⁴⁷ Latini, 66-67.

deepened awareness of God's presence; however, it was this awareness combined with some sort of group study and consideration of the Bible that was the strongest statistical predictor for members to attribute their small groups as fostering answers to prayer, being honest with and forgiving others, and being able to actively share their faith.⁴⁸ In light of this, as well as the researcher's own theological convictions, spiritual practices that utilized scripture were given priority in this project "so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."⁴⁹

Need for Community

While communities still exist on a conceptual and theoretical level, the experience of community marked by intimacy, self-identity, and connection to religious tradition proximal to geographic location is decreasingly the norm. The villages and farms where most people lived at the beginning of the twentieth century have become nearly extinct compared to a century ago when nearly three-quarters of the American population lived in small towns and in rural areas. Today, less than one-quarter reside in these places and the vast majority of people in the United States live in metropolitan areas. In smaller areas (like the location of this project's intervention) that do not fall into this demographic, a loss of community is still felt in a lack of intimacy and depth in relationships with friends, neighbors, and even fellow church members. The individualism associated with the "Me Generation" of the 1970's has permeated and

⁴⁸ Wuthnow, 278-279.

⁴⁹ 2 Timothy 3:17, *The Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). All other biblical references will come from this translation unless otherwise noted. See "The Role of Scripture in Spiritual Formation" in chapter 2 for an elaboration of this topic, as well as "An Exegesis of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (Scripture)" for the researcher's understanding of what this passage implies about the nature of scripture.

increased among all demographics, regardless of geographic size or location.⁵⁰ Latini provides tangible statistics regarding how the loss of community has affected American civic life that points to decreases in people running for office, interest in politics and public affairs, voting, attendance of public meetings, and involvement in civic organizations.⁵¹ This faceless civic involvement extends into moral and spiritual formation as modern “expert systems” are trusted to handle such issues as illness, death, insanity, and deviance, rather than a community of individuals. As relationships are less anchored in external social conditions, community, religion, and family have less influence over one’s life trajectory and people’s encounter’s with different beliefs and practices bring their own customs into question.⁵²

In Wuthnow’s critical research that surveyed numerous kinds of small groups, he found that the loss of relationships mentioned above could be rediscovered and reimagined in the context of small groups. While not uncritical of the type of inward community many have a tendency to foster, he is confident that small groups allow people to know one another at a more intimate level where their doubts, fears, aspirations, grief, joy and victories can be shared.⁵³ As such, they provide some of the intimacy that families, friendships, and neighborhoods provided in traditional

⁵⁰ Wuthnow, 33-35.

⁵¹ Latini, 19. Specifically, in order of their listing, these statistics are: 10-15%; 15-20%; 25%; 35%; and 40%.

⁵² Ibid., 20-21.

⁵³On pages 357-358 Wuthnow concludes that the kind of community often fostered by small groups is inwardly focused and aimed at providing self-help, which works together to promote a utilitarian view of God. This not only brings into question whether or not the movement is helping society as a whole, but is a departure from the way traditional community was experienced and the overall way it framed religion and spirituality.

communities by connecting people to larger social realities and by bringing a personal, human dimension to public life, making them especially suited to the current social environment of the United States.⁵⁴ Likewise, Latini's "well-developed" groups also demonstrated the ability to meet the human need for intimacy through encouraging vulnerability, trust, and familial bonding. However, unlike the majority of small groups (as represented by Wutnow), these groups functioned more like traditional communities where members were committed to one another, cared for one another, and experienced intimacy with God through and with one another. Some of these groups also demonstrated a greater degree of diversity than most small groups, largely due to their recognition of it as one of the major reasons of the group's existence.⁵⁵ It was the opinion of the researcher that this difference in Wutnow's broad survey of small groups and Latini's "well-developed" groups was in some part due to the spiritual practices emphasized in the context of a specific Christian community by the latter. As a result, this project emphasized the transformational nature of Christian community, as well as its role in the process of spiritual formation.⁵⁶

Hopes

The researcher hoped the project would result in increased Christian character marked by individuals responding to God's perceived promptings and guidance out of

⁵⁴ Wutnow, 359-360.

⁵⁵ Latini, 57-60. Latini admits that this neither removes the insular tendencies of small groups, nor guarantees that the community shared in them will affect larger societal or systemic issues. While the potential is there for both of these things, these groups excel at "bonding social capital;" that is, addressing and caring for issues directly related to one of the members or the agreed upon agenda of the group.

⁵⁶ See "Theological Reflections on Community" and "The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation" in Chapter 2 for elaboration on these concepts.

their collective experiences with the practice of *lectio divina*. If this happened, it was suspected that the frequency and depth in which individuals pray, read the Bible, mirror Jesus' example, and notice and respond to God in their own lives and others would increase. Before this hope had the possibility of being realized, the effectiveness of prioritizing spiritual formation in Eastwood's small group ministry through exposure to the practice of *lectio divina* had to be tested and verified.

Research Questions and Project Significance

The main research question for this project's purpose was: What effect did exposing small group members to *lectio divina* have on the facilitation of Christian spiritual formation? Sub-questions were structured similarly, but addressed specific behaviors: What effect did exposing small group members to *lectio divina* have on their awareness of God, the way they respond to God, pray, experience the Bible, understand life-events, mirror Jesus' example, and listen and respond to others.

Of significant value was the simplicity and portability of the project. While the primary concern of the project involved the spiritual climate of Eastwood's small group ministry, its processes could have been applied to a number of settings and groups. Church staff, elder, committee, or business meetings might seem less like ordinary planning meetings and more like God-directed encounters if attention to God's presence and promptings are emphasized. Likewise, ecumenical groups of clergy seeking to find common causes might be challenged to look beyond personal agendas and obligatory engagements to consider how God is directing them to work together in unity as his Church. Due to the various participatory elements involved in the process of group *lectio divina* (reading, silence, listening, meditating, responding, etc.), the project could have

been adapted for a variety of purposes ranging from group discernment to self-awareness. While outside the scope of the project, the researcher's hope for its impact went beyond one small group or even various groups within the church and pertained to its broad functioning and implementation within its context.⁵⁷ By extension, it was believed that awareness of God and attention to his promptings by today's church leaders might have the ability to stave off staff burnout, superficial disagreements and factions, financial crisis, and general apathy.⁵⁸ In short, the project proceeded on the assumption that if a successful intervention within Eastwood's small group ministry could be applied to the Church as a whole, it would create a renewed *ethos* pregnant with divine purpose and presence.

⁵⁷ N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2005), 7. Here Standish reveals the purpose for which he wrote this volume, to detail the insights he gained from introducing the concepts and practices championed in the spiritual formation movement into the overall life of a specific congregation. Being the cumulative work of many years, his work not only addresses methodology and theology, but mentions practical concerns and offers helpful appendices detailing how prioritizing spiritual formation in a church will affect discernment, administration, stewardship, leadership, ministry, etc.

⁵⁸ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989) 56-59. Peterson refers to this type of pastoral leadership as "curing souls" and defines it as "the Scripture-directed, prayer-shaped care that is devoted to persons singly or in groups, in settings sacred and profane." For him, this takes priority and gives purpose and shape to all other ministerial obligations, and is essentially a rediscovery of the historic, Christian pastoral vocation. Rice (see footnote 3 for reference) elaborates on Peterson's proposal by framing spiritual guidance as the organizing principle for ministry and applying it to the various functions of worship leading, pastoral care, teaching, social change, and administration.

CHAPTER TWO

Biblical and Theological Foundation

Introduction

In light of the nature of the culminating project, a biblical and theological explanation is needed for certain forms and concepts that were utilized in the project's intervention. Understanding that the terms "spiritual formation," "community," and "scripture" have all been defined in the previous chapter, this chapter will unpack particular nuances and implications that are assumed in their utilization. While to some degree these concepts will be treated separately for the purpose of clarity, it is the conviction of the researcher that they can only be understood fully when examined jointly, and consideration regarding their bearing on one another is given. The first part of this chapter will seek to establish a biblical precedent for these concepts. This is necessary to demonstrate that they are not merely the ideas of cited theologians and practitioners, but were present in some of the earliest of Christian writings that the Church has come to recognize as inspired and authoritative. The texts in this section will all be drawn from letters attributed to Paul due to the researcher's shared conviction with Dallas Willard that "the heart of Paul and his message lies . . . in the continuous appropriation of the 'real presence' of Christ himself within the experiential life of the believer."¹ As a result, they make for a superb biblical foundation for grounding spiritual formation, along with the necessary intrinsic (both to Paul's letters and spiritual formation itself) and accompanying elements of community and scripture.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding how God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 96.

The second part of this chapter will seek to appropriate the articulated biblical concepts within a theology of practice. Two key figures that will aid in this are Dallas Willard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Although other “voices” will be referenced, it is largely Willard’s articulation of spiritual formation, Bonhoeffer’s conception of community, and their combined understanding and usage of scripture that have influenced the researcher’s own working understanding of these concepts. Let it be noted at the outset that this chapter is not intended to be a complete treatment of spiritual formation, community, or scripture, nor will it fully utilize the aforementioned sources in addressing them; rather, this focused examination will seek to provide biblical legitimacy of the concepts in question followed by theological elaboration of their practical implications. Key points of correlation between the biblical and theological portions of the chapter will be pointed out in the footnotes.

An Exegesis of Galatians 4:19-20 (Spiritual Formation)

Theological Importance

The letter to the Galatians is one from which the church draws a rich heritage of theology. It was the catalyst for great thinkers like Augustine and Luther that were foundational in shaping the way numerous Christian traditions would understand grace, justification, the work of the Holy Spirit, and Christian freedom.² Inherent in these big theological themes is one that does not appear to be major, but is referred to frequently and assumed within some of the larger, more developed ideas in the book; that is,

² Richard B. Hays, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, Leander Keck, et. al., eds. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 183-184.

transformation to Christ.³ Four places in Galatians help clearly express that being “in Christ” involves becoming like Christ.⁴ The verses given attention in the following exegesis are treated in order to demonstrate that “the objective of Paul’s missionary and pastoral exertions is that the Galatians display more and more the character of Christ.”⁵ By doing so, this text presents a biblical precedent for one of them main goals of this project: prioritizing the formation of Christian character within community.

Galatian Conflict

While important in and of itself, the theology of Galatians cannot be divorced from the context in which it was articulated. The angry opening of the letter, which omits any thanksgiving for the Galatians, clearly communicates the basic main purpose of Paul’s writing: to counter a false gospel that insists on the necessity of supplementing faith in Christ with circumcision and other elements of the Mosaic Law.⁶ It is striking

³ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 118. Richard Hays hints at this emphasis in his enumeration of the overall theme in Galatians of the gift of the Holy Spirit resulting from Christ’s death. He states: “Because of the power of the Spirit, there can be no artificial division between the Gospel and ‘ethics.’ God’s redemptive work necessarily includes the reshaping of the community’s life together” (Hays, 187). Dunn suggests that in spite of its understated character, Christ-like transformation could well be part of the foundation of Paul’s ethics. He notes that this is evident in the overly familiar phrase “in Christ” that occurs seven times in Galatians (1:22; 2:4, 17; 3:14, 26, 28; 5:6).

⁴ Galatians 2:20, 3:27, 4:6-7, and 4:19, *The Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). All other biblical references will come from this translation unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Dunn, 119-120.

⁶ Dougless J. Moo, *Galatians* in Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 2. Moo summarizes Paul’s response in Galatians into three steps: 1) he uses his own experience to demonstrate the congruent relationship of the Gospel and the Law of Moses; 2) he uses the Galatians’ experience and scripture to argue that faith sufficiently justifies apart from observing the Law; 3) he shows that godly conduct is the result of this same faith and the work of the Holy Spirit apart from the Law. From a spiritual formation perspective, the third step (while unable to be disconnected from the overall movement) is most evidently applicable and will be directly utilized in examining Gal 4:19-20 below. Those propagating this false gospel are not identified by name, but evidence indicates they were Jewish Christians. Hays adopts Dunn’s

that Paul objected so vehemently to this message.⁷ At stake is the failure to recognize grace, the Spirit's work in community, and God's work in the process of spiritual formation, of which the ultimate goal is being transformed to Christ.⁸ It is to this goal within the book of Galatians that must now receive focus.

Transformed to Christ

It was common to think of one's life as being shaped by the spiritual realm in Paul's day. Gods, demons, and spiritual forces were regularly considered as legitimate things that impacted human affairs and they framed much of what Paul wrote in Galatians. Rather than being "enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods" (4:8), Paul points to his own claim that it is "Christ who lives in me" (2:20) and encourages the Galatians to prioritize the goal of "Christ [being] formed in you" (4:19). Paul's expectation of Christ's involvement within the lives of the Galatians is prominently a matter of moral character that, when prioritized, will color the way the previously mentioned false gospel is understood and received in this spiritually charged

designation of them as "missionaries" but is careful to note the importance of retaining their identity as Jewish Christians and framing the conflict as an "intra-Christian dispute" (Hays, 184).

⁷ Why did he not see this variant preaching of the Gospel in the same vein as the differences he tolerated regarding eating meat and recognizing feast days (cf. Rom 14:1-15:13)? Hays answers this question (186) by pointing out four ways the gospel the missionaries preached was deficient when compared to the life-changing message the Galatians originally received from Paul: 1) their conditional emphasis on circumcision and the Law negates the grace made available through the work of Christ (deficient Christology); 2) their reliance upon the Law for direction and guidance ignores the Spirit's function in Christian community (deficient pneumatology); 3) by refusing to recognize the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ they failed to understand the uniqueness of Christian community (deficient ecclesiology); and 4) by holding up the Law as the continued mechanism for relating to God, they miss how the Gospel reveals God's action in the world (deficient eschatology).

⁸ See "Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation" below.

environment.⁹ The point of emphasis important to this section's purpose is the association of certain spiritual forces with certain forms of character.¹⁰

Thus, based on the context above, Paul's highlighted exhortation in this section can be examined: "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you" (Gal 4:19-20). These verses come as a seemingly abrupt transition, but conceptual continuity can be evidenced if the sentence in v. 19 is understood as a continuation of the one in v. 18.¹¹ Taken this way, the sentiments contained in vv. 18-19 contrast the negative behavior of the missionaries with the Christ-shaped lives of those that adhere to the true Gospel.¹² This line of thought leads to Paul's concerned parental outcry in v. 19 in fear that he will have to essentially reconvert the Galatians that have apparently missed the point of the Gospel. By portraying himself as a mother in labor pains again, he demonstrates perceived futility in regards to his previous work among them, as well as the frustration and hurt this has caused him.¹³

⁹ Bruce W. Longenecker, "Until Christ is Formed in You: Suprahuman Forces and Moral Character in Galatians," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 2, no. 61 (1999): 92-93.

¹⁰ See Willard's association of moral character with spiritual formation under "Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation" below.

¹¹ Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Louisville: WJK, 2011), 284.

¹² Longenecker takes this continuity even deeper and sees the whole of Gal 4:12-20 as demonstrating Paul's understanding of the Christian life as necessarily including a commitment to Christlikeness and moral character (Longenecker, 101).

¹³ De Boer notes that It is also likely that this image is a metaphor used to frame the situation in apocalyptic terms and that Paul "thinks of himself as standing with [the Galatians] at the juncture of the ages, where new life (the life of the new age) constantly struggles to come into being" (De Boer, 284).

The fact that the metaphor changes in the middle of the verse suggests that Paul is concerned about the whole community being formed in the character of Christ.¹⁴ Otherwise, if he would have wanted to carry the birthing image to its logical end, he would have had to say something like: “until you are born anew in Christ.” Instead, the pronoun “you” is plural and the phrase is best translated not as “until Christ is formed in (each one of) you” but rather “until Christ is formed among you,” or “in your midst.”¹⁵ Verse twenty subtly enforces the apocalyptic imagery set forth in v. 19 by calling attention to the fact that Paul “wishes” he could be present and speak with the Galatians in the same way that he did in the past. The imperfect form of the verb indicates that Paul knows that this is not possible.¹⁶ In the words of Todd Still, he is wanting them to recognize that “to move forward, they first need to think backward” as they recognize the urgency of being transformed to Christ now so that they will reap a harvest and be made complete in “God’s good time.”¹⁷

An Exegesis of Colossians 3:15-16 (Community)

Theological Importance

The theological themes developed in Colossians serve as a way to help its readers understand the futility of the supposed Colossian heresy.¹⁸ Andrew Lincoln proposes that

¹⁴ Spiritual formation is incomplete apart from community. See “The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation” below.

¹⁵ Hays, 296.

¹⁶ Moo, 289-290.

¹⁷ Todd D. Still, “In the Fullness of Time (Gal. 4:4): Chronology and Theology in Galatians” in *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul’s Letter*, Mark W. Elliott, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 246-247.

¹⁸ Nijay K. Gupta, *Colossians* in the Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, ed. R. Scott Nash et. al. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2013), 15-16. In asserting its existence, Gupta singles out the

it is best to understand this philosophy as a mix of both Hellenistic and Jewish syncretism.¹⁹ The writer's emphases on Christology and realized eschatology helps him argue against the necessity of mystical experiences in worship.²⁰ In contrast, an understanding of spirituality focused on one's communal conduct in the world is presented over individual ascetic practices and strict observances.²¹ It is this communal, spiritual aspect that this section will address in an effort to show that the project's own convictions on such matters were mirrored in scripture: namely, that spiritual formation happens most fully in community due to Christ being uniquely present in his earthly body.²²

instructions in Col 2:4 and 2:8 that command the Colossians to ensure that "no one" deceives them or takes them captive. He notes that the language of "no one" convincingly points to certain persons teaching certain things. He lays out the aforementioned teachings according to chapter 2 thusly: vv. 6-17 - strict regulations for food/drink and festivals; vv. 18-19 – ascetic practices and transcendent/mystical worship; and vv. 20-23 – sensory restrictions and ascetic practices in religious devotion.

¹⁹ Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Letter to the Colossians" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11, ed. Leander Keck et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 561-567. This is not a middle-of-the-road solution for him, but rather is based on Col 2:18-19 that he says clearly presents a person that is viewed by the writer as one that has claimed faith in Christ, ruling out the philosophy as simply Judaism. At the same time, there is no indication that the verb "to hold" (v. 19) refers simply to having cognitive understanding, which would be necessary if referring to a Hellenistic source. "Instead, the proponent(s) of the teaching have taken a number of elements from Judaism and the Christian Gospel and combined them with typical cosmological concerns from the Hellenistic world" (567).

²⁰ Todd D. Still, "Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?," *New Testament Studies* 1, no 50 (2004), 133-136. While acknowledging both continuity and discontinuity in the eschatology in Colossians when compared to the undisputed epistles, Todd Still affirms a basic similarity can be assumed. Rather than seeing Colossians presenting an altogether different eschatology, he believes it is important to point out that it employs resurrection language to speak of a believer's conversion to, union with, and transformation through Christ. Christians have not yet been raised with Christ to glory (3:1, 4). Furthermore, the resurrection life that they experience in the present is predicated upon their 'faith in the working of God who raised [Christ] from the dead' (2:12b) (136)."

²¹ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* in *The New Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 12-13.

²² See "Theological Reflections on Community" and "The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation" below.

Christ in Community

The verses to be examined fall within a pericope (Col 3:1-17) that is concerned with describing behavior influenced by an affirmation that believers already participate in Christ's resurrection to a degree (see footnote 20). Verses fifteen and sixteen cannot be understood apart from the injunction "to set your minds on things that are above" (v. 2), which is based on the readers' current resurrected status and their ultimate fulfillment in Christ (vv. 3-4). The scope of the passage is not concerned with providing a finite list of virtues and vices to ensure proper behavior; but rather, to highlight the logic and course of the mentioned behavior that reflects a life lived in communion with Christ. Verses fifteen and sixteen will be given extended attention due to the way that they broaden this emphasis to include all Christian conduct within the context of community.²³

"And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" (Col 3:15-16). The two decisive elements that make possible what is being commanded in these verses are "the peace of Christ" and the "word of Christ." While more will be said about the latter, it must first be noted that it is paralleled by the "peace of Christ" and that neither of these are mere abstraction, but take concrete form in the context of the practices mentioned in vv. 15-16. This is made clear in reference to the "peace of Christ" by the verb attached to it that is associated with the

²³ Michael Barram, "Colossians 3:1-1," *Interpretation* 2, no 59 (2005), 188.

role of an official in arbitrating affairs.²⁴ While it may seem to the contrary, concreteness is further emphasized by identifying “the heart” as the location in which “the peace of Christ” is to carry out this function (v. 15a). Greek writers often use “heart” to speak of the interior place where one thinks, feels, and make decisions. However, there is a Hebrew legacy of using it to refer to the whole person. In this instance, it seems that the whole person is in view, with specific reference to one’s emotional state and moral judgement.²⁵ As a result, one must infer that “the peace of Christ” designates an actual reality made possible by the work of Christ in which believers can live in contrast and opposition to the values and standards of the world around them.²⁶

The communal emphasis of these verses follows the identification of the heart as the place where the “peace of Christ” rules and identifies “the one body” as the context in which it is to be expressed (v. 15b). The preposition attached to “body” suggests that the readers were called *in* one body, not *into* one body, implying that the Colossians received the same call collectively, without distinction.²⁷ The injunction “and be thankful” at the end of v. 15 seems to be a disconnected exhortation at first glance, but it is an appropriate response to being called by God in one body (3:15b) to “the peace of Christ” which is to rule in the Colossians’ hearts (3:15a), so that they may be at peace with God and one

²⁴ Christopher R. Seitz, *Colossians* in Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, R. R. Reno, et. al., eds. (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2014), 163.

²⁵ This is similar to the way Willard uses the term heart in his understanding of spiritual formation. See “Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation” below.

²⁶ Sumney, 220.-221.

²⁷ Ibid.

another. In addition, it is thematically connected to references to thanksgiving in previous portions of the letter (Col 1:3; 1:12; 2:7).²⁸

“The word of Christ” taken up in v. 16 is associated with the same preposition as its previously mentioned correlative phrase. Thus, the command to “let the word of Christ dwell in you” is referring to each person individually, as well as the readers collectively.²⁹ To what exactly is “the word of Christ” referring? This rare expression has been translated “message of Christ” (i.e. the message about Christ) in an attempt to interpret its contents. While this phrase may carry the nuance of pointing to all that has been associated with and conveyed to the church as Christ’s legacy, Seitz understands it in a more dynamic way as something that actively “occurs in the form of teaching and admonishing, which cannot be separated from [worship.]”³⁰ So, as the readers “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” (v. 16b), the “word of Christ” will be the source for all the wisdom they need.³¹

The singing mentioned at the end of v. 16 is clearly included due to “the word of Christ” being expressed in the context of worship; however, this would have been understood as a regular part of Christian liturgy without explicit naming.³² Puzzling over

²⁸ John Paul Heil, *Colossians: Encouragement to Walk in All Wisdom as Holy Ones in Christ* in *Early Christianity and its Literature*, Gail R. O’Day, et. al., eds. (Boston: Society of Biblical Literature), 2010), 158-159.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Seitz, 164. Heil agrees that for the Colossians, to “let the word of Christ dwell in them richly . . . means they are to appropriate within them all the richness of understanding, knowledge, and wisdom associated with the mystery of Christ” (Heil, 159).

³¹ This perspective contrasts with the opposed philosophy’s emphasis on individual, ascetic practices that have “an appearance of wisdom,” but are ultimately of “no value” (cf. 2:23) for supporting Christ-like, communal living (Lincoln, 649).

³² Gupta, 146-147. Gupta postulates that Paul mentions it specifically to combat the practice of singing and chanting in an angelic dialect promoted by the opposed philosophy. Rather than being obsessed

why Paul mentioned the specific types of songs that he did is less important than noting the overtly Christian expression they provided the Colossians.³³

An Exegesis of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (Scripture)

Theological Importance

In regards to theology, 2 Timothy and the Pastoral Epistles stand out in contrast to Paul's undisputed letters not only for what they include, but also for what they do not. Rather than emphasizing new life in Christ, the work of the Spirit, or eschatology, the pastoral epistles are more concerned with the settled and fixed issues surrounding virtuous and ethical behavior. While some of the same theological terms used in the Pastoral Epistles are also in the undisputed letters, it is often with a different meaning.³⁴ These theological differences have led many to the question their authorship.³⁵

with this secret language, Paul encourages the Colossians to focus on "songs that are not points of elitist boasting but a Christ-centered context in which the community celebrates God and is taught and admonished."

³³ Ibid., 146.

³⁴ W. Hulitt Gloer, *1 & 2 Timothy* in the Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, R. Scott Nash, et. al., eds. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2010), 7-8. The term "righteousness" is less concerned with redemption, and more with righteous behavior. "Faith" not only refers to trust in God, but to the moral quality of being reliable. At the same time, the broader Pauline themes of salvation by grace, the glorification of suffering, and the importance of the mission to the Gentiles are present.

³⁵ Jouette Bassler points to the fact that the Pastoral Epistles cannot be found in any undisputed early listing of authoritative Christian writings. While appearing in later major manuscript collections of Pauline letters, they seem to have been absent from earlier ones. Bassler is more intrigued, however, by the historical circumstances reflected in the letters marked by an interest and complexity in church leadership roles, as well as in the situation presupposed by the letters themselves, which she does not believe can be reconciled with what we know of Paul's travels from the book of Acts. Finally, she points to distinctive language and style in regards to word choice and theology that contrasts sharply with the undisputed letters. Based on these arguments, Bassler and many others have argued for the pseudonymity of the pastorals [Jouette M. Bassler, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* in Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, ed. Victor Paul Furnish et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 17-19.]. On the other hand, Hulitt Gloer contends that authenticity is not completely impossible by noting that the Pastoral Epistle's seeming contradiction with the book of Acts should be considered while remembering that Acts presents a selective history that leaves much time unaccounted for in its narrative, and that the Pastoral Epistles present problems with Jewish or Jewish-Christian instigators similar to those dealt with by Paul in other letters (1 Tim 1:4; 1:7-8; 4:3 Titus 1:10; 3:9). He also points out that the Pastoral Epistles seem to have a concrete setting (unlike

The Function of Scripture

The situation addressed by 2 Timothy is focused on encouraging Timothy in Paul's absence as he faces opposition from rival teachers that seem to be experiencing a measure of success (2 Tim 2:18; 3:1-5, 13; 4:3-4). It appears that Paul is concerned about Timothy's ability to face opposition and hints at the possibility of perceived timidity and passiveness on his part (1:6). In the course of Paul's encouragement he identifies Timothy's struggle and ministry as his own and expresses confidence in the word of God in the face of opposition (2:9).³⁶ What this confidence entails and accomplishes is further fleshed out in 2 Tim 3:16-17 and is a specific concern of this section due to the way the project understood scripture as being uniquely useful in the process of spiritual formation. The passage demonstrates a biblical affirmation of how an awareness of and focus on scripture can and should influence behavior for and response to God, which was one of the main focuses of the project's intervention. For these reasons, 2 Tim 3:16-17 will now be explicitly examined.

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). In the midst of all that Timothy has and will face, Paul points him to some foundations in chapter three to

some pseudonymous works that create a vague context) due to their detailed narrative with specifics that need no explanation and seem to take for granted that the reader will understand. In regards to the general practice of pseudonymity, he believes it is important to recognize that while it was common in the ancient world, Christians were committed to truth in theory and practice and quick to reject works deemed inauthentic. His ultimate conclusion that the Pastoral Epistles were "written to be read as Paul's own words and thus are best understood in light of all that Paul has written" is shared by the researcher [Gloer, 8-10].

³⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Letters to Paul's Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* in *The New Testament in Context*, Howard Clark Kee and J. Andrew Overman, eds. (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 38.

encourage him in faithfulness.³⁷ Scripture becomes the focal point of these foundations due to the part it necessarily played in the communal instruction Timothy received throughout his life. Unfortunately, what this passage says about scripture has been so scrutinized in theological arguments by so-called fundamentalists and liberals that it is now often assumed that its chief aim is to communicate details regarding the authority of scripture. “Paul’s purpose here is, not to make a statement about the ontological status of scripture . . . but rather to make a statement about its *usefulness*. Therefore, the statement in 3:16-17 is a functional statement.”³⁸

Central to the function of scripture in this passage is its inspiration. Given the functional nature of the overall passage, debates regarding whether or not the word “all” should be taken collectively as a reference to scripture as a whole, or distributively as referring to each and every part of scripture, miss the main idea.³⁹ The word “inspired” literally means “God-breathed,” which recalls the account of creation in Genesis 2 and provides the reason that scripture is “useful” for the list of ensuing practical functions (v. 16a).⁴⁰ According to this text, the quality of inspiration does not necessarily imply that scripture has an active, supernatural aspect that “breathes out” God; but rather, a fixed, passive character that was “breathed out” by God.⁴¹ However, it is the contention of this

³⁷These include formal instruction from trusted teachers (v. 14) and scripture (v. 15). A reference to his childhood in conjunction with the latter implicitly recalls the influence of his grandmother and mother mentioned at the beginning of the letter (1:5), emphasizing the necessary communal element of these foundations (see “The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation” below.).

³⁸ Johnson, 89.

³⁹ However, given the fact that ancient rabbinic traditions of interpretation argue for the latter, it seems like the most likely option (Gloer, 289).

⁴⁰ Bassler, 168.

⁴¹ Kevin G. Smith, “A Grammatical Exposition of 2 Timothy 3:16-17,” *Conspectus: The Journal of South African Theological Seminary*, no. 9 (2010): 99.

chapter (along with Willard and Bonhoeffer), that both of these are true in regard to the way scripture can function in the lives of believers.⁴² As a result of its inspiration, scripture is described as being useful for four things (v. 16b).⁴³ Lest one assumes that these tasks are mentioned haphazardly, Gloer points out that they seem to be carefully structured to include teaching at the beginning, training at the end, and two tasks in between the two (reproof and correction) that are inevitably a part of these.⁴⁴ The ultimate purpose of scripture, however, has yet to be mentioned. The four functions mentioned above are “intermediate purposes” that enable and lead to the primary purpose for which God inspired the scriptures: “so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (v. 17).⁴⁵

⁴² See “The Role of Scripture in Spiritual Formation” below.

⁴³ Gloer, 290. 1) “for teaching” – this is referring to both a didactic and nurturing sense and this function is evident in the writings of the New Testament and the preaching of early Christians (as recorded in the New Testament); 2) “for reproof” – the implied action of this phrase involved correction with the intention of reproach; 3) “for correction” – this is nearly synonymous with the preceding phrase, with the added emphasis of restoration to a better state; 4) “for training in righteousness” – “training” included everything involved in the correct raising of a person to be mature. “Righteousness” refers to both right relationship with God and with one’s fellow human beings. Rabbinic tradition pointed to scripture as the place to embark on such training, beginning with the written law and moving on to oral tradition. The goal of this was the development of certain ethical standards that would enable people to live as they ought, a concept that Paul now appropriates for use by Timothy.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Smith, 102. This is in keeping with the purpose of scripture in its broadest sense; however, it should be noted that the NRSV’s gender inclusive rendering of what literally translates into “the man of God” inadvertently appropriates a specific translation to a more generalized application. The same phrase appears in 1 Tim 6:11, where it refers to Timothy in his role as a church leader. In light of this and the overall context of 2 Timothy, it seems more likely that Paul is specifically referring to Timothy and his ministry. (Bassler, 168). At the same time, it is not inconsistent to assume that Paul envisioned the result of Timothy’s equipping to also result in good works for those under his charge. Good works represent a constant theme in the pastorals, to which God’s people are to be committed. In addition, as understood in the broader Pauline corpus, they are the very reason for which a Christian can claim to have been created in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:10) [Gloer, 291].

Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation

While the term “spiritual formation” conjures up a host of images and activities, this project subscribed to an understanding influenced by Dallas Willard which recognizes that spiritual formation happens to all without regard to a specific religious context or tradition, and is a “process by which the human spirit is given a definite ‘form’ or character.”⁴⁶ In light of this universal truth, one of the main goals of this project was the facilitation of a distinctively Christian spiritual formation, which “refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”⁴⁷ The result is a change in outward living that is not arrived at through legalistic behavior modification, but through inward character formation. Put in biblical/theological terms, Willard says that facilitating spiritual formation is basically responding in obedience to the second part of the Great Commission that exhorts disciples to teach others to obey all that Jesus has commanded of his followers (Matt 28:20a).⁴⁸ “We teach people to do ‘all things whatsoever’ by

⁴⁶ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 19. See “Definitions” in Chapter 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁸ As mentioned in chapter 1 (see “Definitions”), this is separate from the idea of “discipleship,” which Willard believes has lost its content by either devolving into training for evangelism or social action, and has thus become simply an enforcement of legalistic rule-keeping [Agnieszka Tennant, “The Making of the Christian: Richard J. Foster and Dallas Willard on the Difference between Discipleship and Spiritual Formation” in *Christianity Today* 49, no. 10 (2005), 42.]. Interestingly, when compared to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s understanding of discipleship (whose perspective largely influences what this chapter has to say on the subjects of community and Scripture – see “Theological Reflections on Community” and “Theological Reflections on Scripture” below), it becomes apparent that the concepts are connected. Bonhoeffer challenges Christians in *Discipleship* to follow Christ wherever they may be led through embodying the principles found in The Sermon on the Mount [Geffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 136.]. Willard understands spiritual formation as teaching people *how* to do the things that Jesus taught. At the risk of oversimplification, it could be said that the goal of spiritual formation is discipleship.

shaping their hearts to love Christ and his commandments, and by training their entire personality (soul, mind, body, and to some degree even environment) to side with their new heart or spirit, which is the creative element of the self that we also call the will.”⁴⁹ To understand this statement, an examination of how the heart shapes the personality is necessary.

The Heart, Spirit, and Will as Central

Willard refers to the core of a person that ultimately governs all that takes place for the individual as the heart/spirit/will. While referring to the same individual source, each highlights a functional nuance: 1) “will” refers to its power to initiate and create; 2) “spirit” refers to its basic nature as distinct and independent from the physical realm; and 3) “heart” refers to its status as the functioning core of the person. It is Willard’s determination that scripture uses these terms interchangeably, depending on the specific role being carried out. That is why biblical teaching about determining good and evil refer to it as a matter of the heart and spirit (Mk 7:21; Jn 4:23) and portray human desire or will as a decisive factor in relating properly to it (2 Chron 15:4, 15). Thus, volition is intricately intertwined within these three roles made up by the singular source referred to as the heart/spirit/will. This is the area where the possibility and/or effects of sin can be most concretely influenced by the individual.⁵⁰

On the other hand, it must also be emphasized that mere choice is not the only (or even the most important) thing that enables one to be spiritually formed according to

⁴⁹ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What it is and How it Might be Done,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28, no. 4 (2000): 256.

⁵⁰ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 29-34.

God's desires. Given Willard's background in philosophy, he refrains from using traditional theological language in describing the process of spiritual formation, and can appear to overemphasize the role of the individual. Based on his assertion of the universal nature of spiritual formation, James Wilhoit rightfully extends and elaborates this concept to affirm that "all true formation has its origins in God, who through Christ is reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:18-20)."⁵¹ The reason that one can will to be spiritually formed in Christ lies in God's initiation of redemption proclaimed in the Gospel of Jesus. Rather than seeing the Gospel as a door by which one enters Christianity, Wilhoit states that an understanding of it must continually be applied to all volitional efforts aimed at spiritual formation in a way that results in relying on grace to influence the heart/will/spirit.⁵²

Transforming the Mind

Integral in Willard's understanding of allowing the heart to be influenced in the process of spiritual formation, and thus to shape the life of the individual through the exercise of the will, is the role of transforming the mind and thoughts. Because thought brings things before the mind that can be contemplated abstractly in a way that traces out numerous relationships and possibilities in regard to their spiritual significance, it allows the spirit to be formed beyond the concrete boundaries of one's environment and perceptions. This opens one's consciousness up to many things, the most notable being

⁵¹ James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 36.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 26-36.

divine revelation.⁵³ In other words, through sustained mental effort, it is possible for one to expose his/her spirit to the Spirit of God. This is why Paul says “to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom 8:6). Willard elaborates on this verse stating that “the mind or the minding of the Spirit is life and peace precisely because it locates [one] in a world adequate to our nature as ceaselessly creative beings under God.”⁵⁴

It is important at this point to distinguish between what Willard refers to as ideas and images. He refers to “idea systems” as being part of culturally and socially shared assumptions that denote commonly held beliefs about reality (e.g. freedom, education, happiness, etc.). These are taught and inherited, and sometimes manipulated and/or changed by earthly (possibly evil) forces. Closely associated with idea systems are images. Images are always concrete, specific, and laden with feeling. They often have an emotional connection to recognized idea systems (e.g. hair – long, short, blonde, skinhead, etc.).⁵⁵ In Gary Black Jr.’s examination of “Willardian anthropology,” he notes that Willard’s recognition of the locus of feeling in the mind rather than in the body might prove controversial among some psychologists.⁵⁶ Willard, however, argues that

⁵³ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 32.

⁵⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 83.

⁵⁵ Dallas Willard, “The Gospel of the Kingdom and Spiritual Formation” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 48-49.

⁵⁶ Gary Black Jr., *The Theology of Dallas Willard: Discovering Protoevangelical Faith* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 103-104.

since feelings either attract or repel certain thoughts, that the two are intertwined.

Considering this with what has already been stated, it becomes clear that:

A Willardian anthropology coalesces the aspects of the self in an interdependent relationship. The will undergirds the activities of the mind. Choice involves discerning, thinking, and choosing between different thoughts and feelings in relationship to the intentions of the will. Every choice involves thoughts and feelings. Yet, it is also true that what we think and feel is very significantly tied to our choices.⁵⁷

Thus, it can be said, the doctrine of free will plays a vital role in the process of spiritual formation.⁵⁸

The Transformed Soul

The soul necessitates mentioning in this explication of spiritual formation, as Willard singles it out as organizing or running the whole person. Unlike the heart/spirit/will, it should not be understood as the core of a person, but the deepest part of the person in regards to overall functioning. Willard compares it to “a computer that quietly runs a business or manufacturing operation and only comes to our attention when it malfunctions or requires some adaptation to new tasks. It can be significantly ‘reprogrammed,’ and this . . . is a major part of what goes into the spiritual formation . . . of a person.”⁵⁹ Biblical evidence of the soul’s integrated and necessary dimension within a person lies in passages where it is referred to in third person (cf. Ps 42:5; Lk 12:19).

⁵⁷ Black, 104.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 69-74. Here Black notes that the ideas of conversion and spiritual transformation are nearly the same in Willard’s thinking. He sees justification (atonement) as something accomplished by the Trinity and beyond human ability, and considers conversion a first step of “placing one’s confidence in the reality and consequence of divine love and grace.” Transformation occurs as the convert’s understanding of God is adapted through continual submission to this reality. As a result, Willard reconnects the historically separated ideas of justification and sanctification by joining their traits and goals into one overall process.

⁵⁹ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 37.

Important for the purposes of this section is not only acknowledging the soul and its ability to be reprogrammed, but recognizing that it is done so by the spirit or will through the transforming of the mind and the practicing of spiritual disciplines.⁶⁰

While it is correct to think of a transformed soul (resulting in transformed action) as the overall goal of spiritual formation, it is important not to lose sight of the role of grace in this process. Much of Willard's description focuses on human effort, but not without first recognizing God's initiation and design in one's ability to "place [the soul] solidly in the care of God. And through the grace [one receives] in the care of God we are formed, or reformed, ever so gradually in the character, or likeness, of Jesus."⁶¹

The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Spiritual Formation

The most important theological statement that can be made about Willard's understanding of the way spiritual disciplines function in regard to spiritual formation is his view of the role of the body in redemption. Eschewing the reduction of salvation to mere atonement or forgiveness, Willard sees it rather as an "impartation of life" that reflects and is the life of Christ (cf. Jn 10:10; 1 Jn 5:12; Eph 2:5).⁶² His view places nuanced emphasis on the body as being both an effective and effected agent in the process of salvation, and necessitates a recognition of both bodily limitations and possibilities in the context of it being freely surrendered to God.⁶³ Black rightly notes that

⁶⁰ Ibid., 37-38. For more on "transforming the mind," see the above subsection. For more on spiritual disciplines, see "The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Spiritual Formation" below.

⁶¹ Mindy Caliguire, "Gray's Anatomy and the Soul" in *Eternal Living: Reflections on Dallas Willard's Teaching and Faith Formation*, Gary W. Moon, ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 204.

⁶² Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 37-38.

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

this seems contrary to what some would consider popular, “evangelical orthodoxy,” yet ironically asserts that it points to a more generous understanding of grace that is not in an oppositional relationship with effort, but a cooperative one that recognizes the provisional means made available by God through the spiritual disciplines for engaging and embodying the life of Christ.⁶⁴ Understanding salvation in this way necessitates a view of the body that sees it as made in God’s image, and therefore capable of exercising a limited degree of independent power in forming one’s character.⁶⁵

The process of spiritual formation through exercising spiritual disciplines then, should not be understood in mutually exclusive terms that separate God’s activity and humanity’s effort. Rather, it is a conglomeration of activity made possible by God’s character and initiative where people cooperatively interact with him through activities of the mind and body, in a deliberate effort to bring their full selves into submissive collaboration with God and his spiritual reality (cf. Rom 6:13).⁶⁶ When Jesus’ humanity is taken seriously, it is apparent that he set the precedent for this framework in the overall lifestyle he adopted of personal and corporate communion with his Father. His prayers were heard because of the submission he learned through acts of humility and devotion (cf. Heb 5:7-8). While Jesus’ relationship with the Father is unique, people are invited into the same intimacy he had with him in the body through exercising spiritual disciplines.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Black, 79-81.

⁶⁵ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 53.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 67-68.

⁶⁷ Wilhoit, 41. Bonhoeffer's writings display a similar dynamic between the work of God and the effort of people in regards to prayer and other spiritual disciplines in *Discipleship*. While crediting true prayer as only coming from “the will of Jesus,” he, nonetheless, affirms that “a disciple’s life requires strict

One final thing must be affirmed about the body and its role in enabling spiritual formation through the spiritual disciplines: it is the place where one can be most fully unified with God. This mandates a positive view of it, as opposed to the common negative assumption that the “flesh” is inescapably marred by sin or the passive substance that makes up the body. Willard emphasizes that the term “flesh” in scripture most essentially refers to “something active, a specific power or range of powers that is embedded in a body of a specific type, able or likely to do only certain kinds of things” (cf. Gen 7:15; Ps 56:4; Gal 4:23).⁶⁸ Thus, engaging in the disciplines is not a “settling,” so to speak, for an inferior experience of and relation to God until one transcends the limits of the body. On the contrary, the goal of the disciplines are uniquely body centered, enabling it to fulfill its active role in working with God for holistic transformation. In elaborating on this point of Willard’s, Keith Matthews quotes him as saying: “while it is true that apart from Christ we can do nothing, it is also true, that if we do nothing it will be apart from Christ.”⁶⁹

Theological Reflections on Community

external discipline” that is only made possible by faith and submission to Jesus. He speaks of prayer and other spiritual disciplines as enabling the submission needed to maintain a life of discipline, thus affirming an interactive relationship between human and divine activity [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4, Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., ed., Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 152-159]. Willard’s work compliments and extends Bonhoeffer’s theological affirmation of discipleship as being possible through human and divine effort with his explanation of how this happens to the overall person. This becomes especially important when considered in light of Bonhoeffer’s understanding of community (See “the Role of Community in Spiritual Formation” below).

⁶⁸ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 86-87.

⁶⁹ Matthews, “The Transformational Process” in *The Kingdom Life*, 93.

As previously noted, a key source to the understanding of community that was assumed by this project are the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, most specifically contained in his doctoral thesis, *Sanctorum Communio*. While the whole work reads as a successive working-out of the functions and implications of church-community, space mandates only limited commentary on some of his main ideas that most specifically influenced this project. The goal of *Sanctorum Communio* was to provide an explanation of the way church-community functions in the social realm in a way that adequately considered sociology and theology. Bonhoeffer believed these two categories would provide one another with perspectives each traditionally lacked. The point for the purposes of this section is not to debate whether or not this was accomplished, but rather to examine the implications of the social reality of the church Bonhoeffer espoused.⁷⁰ For him, the reality of the church unifies all other understandings, including the way individuals relate to one another, understand themselves, and the way communal relations exist and are concretely expressed. “Formally speaking, the necessary bond between the basic-relations and the empirical form of community, understood as a unique structure, constitutes the essence of the church.”⁷¹

The Church Established in and through Christ

Central to Bonhoeffer’s understanding of Christian community is a recognition of the loss of human and divine connection due to the reality of sin introduced by Adam as

⁷⁰ Brendan Leahy, “‘Christ Existing as Community’: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Notion of the Church,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 1-2, no. 73 (2010): 37.

⁷¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 1, Clifford J. Green, ed., Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 124-125.

representative of all humanity. As a result of sin, a bond is formed among people based on this shared trait and humanity becomes a collective group recognized as a community based on its common, isolated state. This does not discount individual accountability, but on the contrary, heightens it and results in isolation not only from God, but from other people, in spite of all being equally affected by sin. Because God chose to restore his community with humanity through the giving of his own self in Jesus, community among people is also restored in the same way that it was destroyed (i.e. the function of vicarious representative).⁷² Jesus' resulting relationship to the church can be understood through the roles attributed to him in the book of Hebrews as "pioneer and perfecter" (Heb 12:2). This is not to say that Jesus founded the "empirical form of community" in the church, but rather that he makes possible "the essence of the church" expressed in a pardoned humanity united with Christ and one another in a relationship of love.⁷³

Thus, the above affirmation necessitates recognizing that the Gospel and the life that it makes available and intends for people, can only fully be understood and received in the physical and sociological reality of the church. It means that, quite literally, "Jesus Christ lives here on earth in the form of his body, the church-community," and that "the church is the present Christ himself."⁷⁴ Geoffrey Kelly and F. Nelson elaborate on the implications of this assertion by noting that if it is indeed true, then through Christ God's desires and goals for the world are not difficult to understand or ascertain, as Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:12 are sometimes erroneously used to imply, (i.e. For now we

⁷² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 145-148.

⁷³ Ibid., 124, 153.

⁷⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4, Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., ed., Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 150.

see in a mirror, dimly . . .); but rather, assume physical availability within the church.⁷⁵ Recognizing this sociological reality of the church does not obliterate the reality of the world, but on the contrary, affirms its existence and that the former can influence the latter as God enables it to function as the only authentic reality that will ultimately prove consequential (cf. Jn 17:15-16).⁷⁶ A later section will return to the question of whether it is possible to reconcile Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church with Willard's articulation of spiritual formation in community (see "The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation" below), but let it simply be noted here that one point of major agreement and convergence is their recognition of the church as a unique and overlapping reality in the midst of the world that is ultimately made possible by the work of Christ.⁷⁷

The Holy Spirit and the Church

Bonhoeffer ties the Holy Spirit to the church in such a way that the latter cannot be recognized outside of the former. It uniquely belongs to the church, so much so that Bonhoeffer boldly asserts that people could not have understood its complete essence before the church existed. At the same time, he describes the work of the Holy Spirit as only happening through "the word of Christ" that is "brought to the heart of the hearers by the Spirit."⁷⁸ For him, Christ and the Holy Spirit are impossible to separate. The Holy Spirit contains no other message than that of Christ, and Christ exists in and empowers

⁷⁵ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 150.

⁷⁶ Leahy, 49.

⁷⁷ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 186. Here Willard refers to "the visible church" and "the invisible church" in corresponding ways that Bonhoeffer mentions "the empirical form of the church" and "the essence of the church" accordingly. See "The Form of the Church" below for elaboration on the latter.

⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 158.

the church through the Holy Spirit.⁷⁹ Admittedly, Bonhoeffer's assignment of roles between Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the midst of the church-community can seem tedious and sometimes blurry. Kelly and Nelson rightly note that this ambiguity is shared in scripture, especially in the letters of Paul where phrases abound in which the Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 15:45; 2 Cor 3:17-18 Gal 4:6; Rom 8:9; Phil 1:19).⁸⁰ Chief for Bonhoeffer in distinguishing between the work of the Holy Spirit and Christ is the recognition that "the resurrection [became] present in the history of believers through the Holy Spirit, who is the empowering force in the later preaching and extension of what has already been brought into being by Jesus Christ."⁸¹ Thus, he is able to affirm that the church, while empirically (to use one of his categories) established and administrated by people, was inspired and continues to be sustained as a uniquely divine institution in which God is encountered in a way that is impossible elsewhere.

Important for the purposes of this project was an understanding of the way an individual joins, experiences, and participates in the church-community with and through the Holy Spirit and other people. In the same way that people are both communally and individually impacted by both sin and redemption, so are they incorporated into the community of the church. While Bonhoeffer recognizes that this is an individual act that happens separately for each person, he also affirms that "when Christ comes 'into' us through the Holy Spirit, the church comes 'into' us. The Holy Spirit, however, moves us by putting Christ in our hearts, creating faith and hope. But this faith in Christ generated

⁷⁹ Ibid., 161.

⁸⁰ Kelly and Nelson, 62-63.

⁸¹ Kelly and Nelson, 58.

by the Holy Spirit includes faith in the church-community in which Christ reigns.”⁸²

While this project did not affirm the concept of predestination that influences the previous statement (see previous footnote), it agreed that “the Holy Spirit of the church-community is directed as a personal will toward personal wills.”⁸³

The Form of the Church

Most immediately, Bonhoeffer identifies the empirical form of the church as its current form and shape in the present day of earthly reality, having been established following Christ’s ascension and ceasing to exist upon his return. Due to human imperfection and sin, it necessarily includes flaws, brokenness, and unregenerate individuals. At the same time, it should also be affirmed that the empirical church is not merely a human or sinful institution, but one that is brought into reality by the Holy Spirit and is currently Christ’s manifestation of his physical presence on the earth.⁸⁴ As such, the church can and should be conceived as being both holy and sinful at the same time. This fact does not diminish Christ’s presence, but rather, gives evidence of it as the enabler of holiness in the midst of sinful reality.⁸⁵ This is in contrast to what Bonhoeffer

⁸² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 161. Undergirding this assessment in Bonhoeffer’s thought are the ideas of predestination (*Sanctorum Communio*, 162-165) and *daisin*, “existence” or “awareness of being” [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 2, Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., ed., H. Martin Rumscheidt, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 26-27]. While recognizing that God redeems people individually, Bonhoeffer does not compromise his Lutheran heritage and states that God sees the church and the individual in a single act and credits God fully for the individual’s reception of faith and incorporation into the church. For him, the role of the individual is being aware of the “being” that Christ has made available that is at the same time both knowable by and beyond human capabilities. “Christ ‘is’ only ‘in faith,’ and yet ‘is’ Lord of my faith” (*Act and Being*, 128.).

⁸³ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 161. The commonality this has with a Willardian ecclesiology and its implications for spiritual formation will be discussed in “The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation.”

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 208-210.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

terms “the essential church” that exists conceptually as including only those elected in Christ, having been conceived of by God since before the beginning of time, and will ultimately give way to the Realm of God following Christ’s second coming.⁸⁶

Most important to address for the purposes of this project is the empirical church, as it necessarily includes measurable elements that can be experienced and altered. It is to physical elements, carried out together in the empirical church, that Bonhoeffer accorded indispensable status in the activity of manifesting Christ’s presence in the world.

Understanding that community is made possible through Christ’s soteriological vicarious representative action (see “The Church Established in and through Christ” above),

Bonhoeffer writes about life in the church as being enabled by Christ, but involving the concrete actions of people; as an existence that is not centered on the individual, but nonetheless must involve it to achieve the shared experience of being Christ to and for one another.⁸⁷ However, as much as he writes about specific spiritual practices and acts within the context of community, Leahy cautions against interpreting these as central or determinative to Christian communal existence. While certainly a necessary expression of the empirical church, Leahy appropriates the main emphasis of Bonhoeffer’s writings to assert that “ecclesial existence . . . is not a question of special practices of piety, or particular religious acts, or religious methodology. It is a question of the faith that is life as evident in biblical figures. It is a life that is caught up in Christ’s losing of his life.”⁸⁸

Leahy asserts that it is because of the unifying nature of this Christocentric faith that

⁸⁶ Ibid., 216-218.

⁸⁷ Leahy, 41.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 54.

Bonhoeffer can speak of the church as empirically existing in many different physical congregations, but also comprising a unified whole at the same time.

Bonhoeffer brings this dichotomy into focus in *Discipleship* as he compares the church's visible nature to the actions of the first disciples called to follow Jesus: "The community of those who followed him was manifest to the eyes of the world. Here were bodies that acted, worked, and suffered in community with Jesus. The body of the exalted Lord is likewise a visible body, taking the form of the church-community."⁸⁹ Thus, it is not engaging in physical, spiritual practices that enables the church to be visible; rather, they are proof that it has become visible, and thereby legitimate in the eyes of the world, through the work of Christ. The question remains: does Bonhoeffer's explication of community allow for engagement with spiritual formation as understood by Willard? It is to this that the next section will focus attention.

The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation

While writing in separate periods with different motivations and frames of reference, the thoughts of Bonhoeffer and Willard basically converge where the topics of community and spiritual formation intersect. This is most apparent when each one's area of emphasis is examined from the other's perspective. While Bonhoeffer never explicitly uses the term "spiritual formation," he writes about the human spirit and will. He conceives of the human spirit in much the same way that Willard does, deeming it "the bond of self-consciousness that documents its structural unity."⁹⁰ Likewise, the term "will" is used by him in a seemingly congruous manner with "spirit," but seems to

⁸⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 226.

⁹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 67.

nuance the purposeful, action-oriented disposition of the individual.⁹¹ It must be acknowledged in discussing these terms that Bonhoeffer's main goal, unlike Willard's, is not to emphasize how a person is inwardly formed in a way that bears directly on their outward character; but rather, to establish a sociological category that functions seamlessly in both the individual and communal realm, and furthermore necessarily ties the former to the latter.⁹²

This prioritization of the individual's and community's role in shaping one another, however, did not preclude Bonhoeffer from recognizing the importance of attending to the specific forming of one's spirit or will within community. In elaborating on Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Holy Spirit as expressed in the form of a written meditation on Psalm 119, Kelly and Nelson interpret his assertions as crediting the Holy Spirit with the "conforming of our human will to God's will."⁹³ This sounds very much like Willard's overall goal for Christian spiritual formation. More commonality can be found in their thought when it is recognized that Willard intended for all that he wrote about individual spiritual formation to spring from the context of community. Borrowing Bonhoeffer's concepts of the empirical and essential church, Willard speaks of the

⁹¹ Ibid., 70.

⁹² Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 65-80. Bonhoeffer does this here by speaking of the personal being as "structurally open" and "structurally closed." For the structurally open individual, the spirit is allowed to recognize and express itself in relation to being "necessarily bound up with sociality." Bonhoeffer goes so far as to say that "only in reciprocal interaction with other minds is self-conscious thinking and willing possible and meaningful." By natural extension of this openness is also the ability for a person to allow the opposite. This ability is ironically strengthened as one's spirit develops and becomes self-aware. Bonhoeffer brings this concept to bear on community by maintaining that it can be understood as a "collective person" in the same way that an individual can. Thus, he argues, that members of a community are not viewed separately, but also that the "collective person" is dependent upon the individual person for existence. As a result, both exist in and are contingent upon one another.

⁹³ Kelly and Nelson, 64.

“visible” and “invisible” church respectively. While omitting the language of predestination employed by Bonhoeffer, Willard also credits God with making community possible first for people that choose to relate to him through faith in the invisible church, and thereby enabling it to be possible in the visible church as his presence flows to and from them to others. For Willard, the visible community is the vehicle through which the transformational aspect of spiritual formation occurs: “This must happen within the imperfect communities and congregations available to us now. But the new life can and must eventually transform the entire social dimension of our self toward the heavenly future in which we shall know as we are known by God.”⁹⁴

In spite of having different concerns and focused emphases, Bonhoeffer and Willard should not be understood as having completely different views on community and spiritual formation, especially in regards to the way that they both view justification, sanctification, and soteriology as being interconnected.⁹⁵ On the contrary, while certainly an oversimplification, one way of thinking of the way Bonhoeffer’s and Willard’s work informs this project is to associate Willard with the “what” of spiritual formation, and Bonhoeffer with the “how” of community. While both utilize biblical language, Bonhoeffer’s utilization of systematic theology (specifically in regard to the relationship between Christ and the community) aids in understanding spiritual formation in the context of the church. When their works are allowed to inform each other, the church is rightly reminded of the intentionality and effort required of spiritual formation as put

⁹⁴ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 186-187.

⁹⁵ Joseph McGarry, “Conformed to Christ: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Christian Formation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 2, no. 5 (2012): 226.

forth by Willard, while Bonhoeffer's communal emphasis "protects [it] from becoming a specifically individualistic phenomenon."⁹⁶

Theological Reflections on Scripture

It may seem strange to move from the broad categories of spiritual formation and community to the particular subject of scripture; however, because the meditative reading of scripture was a key discipline utilized by this project in fostering spiritual formation, it necessarily requires examination. While Bonhoeffer's and Willard's understandings of community and spiritual formation seem to complement one another when examined from each one's area of interest, their views and treatments of scripture correlate quite naturally regardless of their individual contexts and persuasions. This section will give each equal treatment in articulating an understanding of scripture that supports meditative reading as a necessary discipline that is foundational for spiritual formation.

The Nature of Scripture

Foundational to both of them is a moderated recognition of Scripture's authority that is not tangled up in rational arguments and proofs. Rather than blindly acquiescing to the historical-critical methods of his day, Bonhoeffer names faith and its concrete expression in community as the only viable affirmations of the nature of scripture. By not denying the value of utilizing "human methods" (including those involved in scripture's writing and transmission) and recognizing that it is the Christ of the Bible that makes faith and community possible, Bonhoeffer articulates an intricate understanding of scripture's divine, authoritative nature that is necessarily connected to concrete

⁹⁶ Ibid.

expressions and forms.⁹⁷ The basic authoritative nature of Scripture is also one of its few characteristics about which Willard explicitly speaks:

The Bible is inerrant in its original form and infallible in all its forms for the purposes of guiding us into a life-saving relationship with God in his kingdom. It is infallible in this way precisely because God never leaves it alone . . . [The] Bible reliably fixes the boundaries of everything God will ever say to humankind.⁹⁸

Both of these perspectives, at the very least, imply the characteristics that have traditionally been labeled as “inspiration” and “revelation” in regard to scripture’s nature. To lapse into debating tedious theories over how these things are possible would contradict what is expressed regarding them above. In the same way that James Wilhoit and Evan Howard do, it is simply enough to affirm that the revelatory nature of scripture accurately exposes who God is and what he desires for people, and that its inspired character entails divine oversight in its composition.⁹⁹ Specific to scripture’s inspired and revealed nature is a Christocentric view that is important to Bonhoeffer and Willard, as well as this project. “Willard describes the scriptures as a physical, written manifestation of God’s revealed presence among humanity.”¹⁰⁰ This has to do with his recognition of the *Logos* (translated “Word” in Jn 1:1) as a developed Christian concept of both “a metaphysical and spiritual presence that represents and encapsulate the ultimate and final order of reality. Hence, the *Logos* is present in the Scriptures, in history, in nature, and

⁹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible: Human Word and Word of God*, ed. Manfred Weber, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004), 11-15.

⁹⁸ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 141-142.

⁹⁹ James C. Wilhoit and Evan B. Howard, *Discovering Lectio Divina: Bringing Scripture into Ordinary Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 30-31.

¹⁰⁰ Black, 60.

also discovered in the lives of individuals.”¹⁰¹ Kelly and Nelson accurately describe how this assertion is also possible in Bonhoeffer’s thought by pointing to “Bonhoeffer’s unbending belief that Jesus Christ, the biblical Word, and the Holy Spirit share in God’s being present in every relationship that emanates from God’s gift of faith.”¹⁰²

Recognizing Christ’s presence in scripture is not a magical or mystical quality, since as *Logos* he is in all; however, when considered alongside its assumed authoritative nature described above, one can definitely affirm that it grants access and insight to God in a unique way that is impossible otherwise.

The Purpose of Scripture

Like Bonhoeffer’s evidences of scripture’s authority, he also affirms that its purpose is wrapped up in the identity of Christ and the community of his followers. Because the words of scripture bear the testimony of the church, interaction with the text serves to unify the community from which it has come and by which it has been affirmed. This is not a means unto itself, just as the words of scripture do not elevate the Bible for its own sake; rather, any building up of the church through engagement with scripture must ultimately lead to an encounter with Jesus Christ, for and by whom scripture is inspired and the church is established.¹⁰³ This was true for Bonhoeffer regardless of the portion of scripture in question. He not only saw the gospels and epistles in the New Testament as pointing to Christ, but Stephen Plant notes that “he viewed the Old

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Kelly and Nelson, 78.

¹⁰³ Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible*, 31, 53.

Testament as a book of Christ and routinely engaged in Christological readings of the Old Testament texts. He believed the Bible – even the Old Testament – could serve as guide for Christian social and personal ethics.”¹⁰⁴

Willard echoes these concerns for practice in the preface of *Divine Conspiracy* where he briefly comments on his conviction that the Bible’s purpose is practical before it is academic. While not wanting to discount reading it intelligently, he wants to affirm that it can (and should) primarily be read seriously and carefully in a straightforward manner with the goal of being directed into the kind of life offered, embodied, and made possible by Jesus.¹⁰⁵ Black rightly points out that Willard’s approach is admirably submitted to the authority of the Bible, but can lead to theological vagueness in regards to specific historical doctrines.¹⁰⁶

Both Bonhoeffer and Willard emphasize practice over theory in regards to the purpose of scripture. While this can lead to theological obscurity for Willard, one might accuse Bonhoeffer of eisegetical spiritualizing for the way he reads the Old Testament. Furthermore, it is impossible to read Christ into the Old Testament or to understand the Bible’s purpose as leading people into Christlikeness without some sort of pre-determined theological lenses. Understanding that both figures are reacting to their

¹⁰⁴ Stephen J. Plant, *Taking Stock of Bonhoeffer: Studies in Biblical Interpretation and Ethics* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 49.

¹⁰⁵ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, xvi.

¹⁰⁶ Black, 65. In footnote 31 on this page, Black singles out double-predestination as one example of a traditionally orthodox view Willard is reluctant to address due to his claim that it makes “God’s overarching goodness, justice, and loving character” difficult to believe.

individual contexts which they perceive to have lost sight of the practical purpose of scripture, one must be cautious of applying their approaches myopically.¹⁰⁷

The Interpretation of Scripture

One reason the warning in the above paragraph is given is to protect the interpretation of scripture. Ironically, it is exactly to guard this idea that Bonhoeffer was so staunchly critical of the biblical scholarship of his day. His straight-forward, Christocentric exegesis is displayed in *Discipleship* where his comments on the Sermon on the Mount demand a direct recognition and keeping of the commands and demands set forth for disciples by Jesus. The fact that this volume consists of lectures originally given to students in the Preachers' Seminary displays his serious intention for wedding practice and interpretation.¹⁰⁸ He displays the same exegetical tendencies in regards to the whole Bible, which he sees as depending on the revelation of Christ for ultimate meaning and certainty.¹⁰⁹ This can be most easily highlighted in his understanding of redemption, which he claims is absent in the Old Testament except in a mythological form that never comes to physical fruition. Whereas, "the Christian hope of the resurrection is distinguished from mythological ideas by the fact that human beings are directed to their

¹⁰⁷ Bonhoeffer's perspective can best be understood in light of the historical criticism common of Germany in his day that was specifically focused on textual and redaction criticism that presented assumptions with a finite certainty that left little room for doubt or engagement with theology (Plant, 56). Willard's is undoubtedly influenced by the "battles over the Bible" that has taken place in American, evangelical Christianity over the past fifty years or so that has demanded adherence to scripture's verbal, plenary inerrancy to one extreme, and questioning its uniquely inspired and revealed nature on the other (Black, 60).

¹⁰⁸ Wolfgang Klausnitzer, "Discovering the Presence of Christ in the World: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Contribution to the Discussion on the Authority of the Bible in the Church," *Ecclesiology* 2, no. 2 (2006): 160, 162.

¹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible*, 67.

authentic life on this earth in an even more pronounced manner than in the Old Testament.”¹¹⁰

Willard also prioritizes Christ in scriptural interpretation by distinguishing between the *words* printed in the Bible and the *Word (Logos)* to which it witnesses. For him, the words of the Bible present a consistent revelation of God for all time, but God also uses these words as a medium to specifically communicate to humanity. “Thus, the Scriptures are an objective presence of the *Logos* in the world. Yet, there must also be a commensurate willingness or desire on the part of humanity to actively listen.”¹¹¹ This ultimately leads to a recognition of the Bible’s bound nature to language that fixates it as special and unique, but cannot and should not be understood as exhaustive or confused with God himself.¹¹² While having different contextual motivations (see footnote 107), both Bonhoeffer and Willard unapologetically point to Jesus as the criterion by which all scripture is to be interpreted. This is acceptable as a broad, overarching hermeneutic that recognizes the unique and distinctive features of the physical and human component of the Bible (authorship, composition, genre, etc.), without diminishing its divine source and revelatory nature and purpose.

The Role of Scripture in Spiritual Formation

As mentioned above, Bonhoeffer and Willard do not share a contextually analogous understanding of spiritual formation, yet both use language involving the

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹¹¹ Black, 62.

¹¹² Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible*, 62.

forming of the “heart” and/or “will.”¹¹³ It is only through this previously explained connection that this section can proceed, by pointing out their prioritization of scripture in the process recognized in their thought as spiritual formation, with the intention of communicating an understanding of this dynamic assumed by the project.

For Willard, the role of scripture in spiritual formation can best be summed up in the word “potential.” In light of his recognition of the role of one’s will,¹¹⁴ scripture should not be understood as something that forces its perspectives upon a reader. While affirming its inspired and revealed nature,¹¹⁵ Willard understands it as “a tool of the *Logos* in tune with the character of God, [which] does not set out to overcome the human will. Consequently, the message of scripture must be willingly accepted.”¹¹⁶ This does not diminish the power or role of the words of scripture in spiritual formation. Willard takes Jesus’ affirmation to his disciples, “the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn 6:63), to be quite literal and appropriates it in regards to scripture as a whole. As a result, he recognizes the special potential of scripture to reveal ultimate reality according to God’s divine plan, purposes, and direction when one willingly submits him/herself to it.¹¹⁷ This happens not only by way of informational enlightenment, but through the character and working of the scriptures themselves. In commenting on the discipline of scripture mediation, Willard expresses confidence that

¹¹³ See “Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation” and “The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation” above.

¹¹⁴ See “The Heart, Spirit, and Will as Central” above.

¹¹⁵ See “The Nature of Scripture” above.

¹¹⁶ Black, 64.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

“[scripture’s] meaning for us can emerge and form us as God works in the depths of our heart, mind, and soul.”¹¹⁸

It is striking how closely Willard and Bonhoeffer utilize similar vocabulary in describing the active role of scripture in the spiritual life of the Christian. While their terms are used with separate contextual goals,¹¹⁹ the concern for portraying scripture as an active agent that bears directly on one’s experience of and relation to God is shared. Bonhoeffer does this by recognizing a difference between reading with one’s intellect and allowing scripture to penetrate one’s heart, the latter of which he calls “meditation.” Most importantly, he believes that doing this has a direct effect on one’s whole person.¹²⁰ For him, when scripture is meditated upon with one’s whole person, its precepts become available to the person in a tangible way so that it cannot help but influence outward behavior.¹²¹ Bonhoeffer demonstrates this same conviction in practical instructions given regarding prayer where he boldly states that “all prayers of the Bible are such prayers which we pray together with Jesus Christ, in which he accompanies us, and through which he brings us into the presence of God.”¹²² Primary for the purposes of this project

¹¹⁸ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 177.

¹¹⁹ See “The Role of Community in Spiritual Formation” for a differentiation of these goals.

¹²⁰ While “whole person” is analogous to the “soul” in Willardian thought, Bonhoeffer uses the term “heart” in a more generalized sense that seems to include what Willard would call “the control center of the person” as well as the whole of one’s being. See “The Transformed Soul” under “Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation” above for more on Willard’s distinctions.

¹²¹ Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible*, 70-73.

¹²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, trans. James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), 14. This statement is rooted in similar convictions that Willard and Bonhoeffer share regarding the nature of scripture. See “The Nature of Scripture” above for more information.

was the joint conviction Willard and Bonhoeffer hold regarding scripture's active nature in spiritual formation. While both affirm that individual effort is necessary in utilizing scripture for this purpose, neither overlook God's primacy in the process or scripture's unique nature that sets it apart for spiritual use in the first place. This nuanced recognition of the complex relation between human and divine involvement is necessary not only in understanding the nature of scripture itself, but also in articulating the role of scripture in spiritual formation.¹²³

Conclusion

Spiritual formation, community, and scripture form the framework of this chapter. While not using the specific term "spiritual formation," it's clear that early Christians associated spiritual forces with forms of character. Paul's select words to the Galatians concerning "Christ [being] formed in you" (Gal 4:19) verify that this was understood as an inward process that had outward consequences. His concern to address this actively within the Galatian community is appropriated well by Willard in his recognition of the real possibility for people to have the character of Christ. His emphasis of the different parts of the individual (heart/spirit/will and soul) in spiritual formation provides tangible and accessible language to discuss and measure the degree to which one is being formed spiritually in a specifically Christian manner, as well as to assume an active role in the process. The community in which Christian spiritual formation is to be carried out is not explicitly defined in the New Testament, but its reality is assumed in the way communities are addressed. This is evidenced in Paul's words in Colossians 3:15-16 that speak of being called collectively "in the one body" (v. 15). While urging each individual

¹²³ Wilhoit and Howard, 37.

member to be active in living out the character of Christ, he simultaneously recognizes that this can only happen fully in the context of a community where Christ is recognized and worshipped (v. 16). It is because of this kind of language in the New Testament that Bonhoeffer understands the empirical church community as the literal place in which Christ dwells and enables the individual efforts of people to be Christ to and with one another. At the same time, this is one of the instances where Willard would denote the usage of the word “heart” (v. 15) as implying a necessary inward process that gives expression to the outward focus of the overall passage. It may seem redundant to use scripture to establish a precedent for its use in this inward process of spiritual formation; however, devoid of such a recognition, Willard and Bonhoeffer’s understanding of it as being uniquely active in the process might appear unwarranted. The assertion presented in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 portrays scripture’s practical usefulness in producing good works through instruction due to the quality of divine inspiration. While not addressed in this passage, it is this same quality from which Bonhoeffer and Willard expand on scripture’s ability to act on the senses similar to the way “the word of God” is described as doing elsewhere (cf. Heb 4:12) and “the word of Christ” above.¹²⁴

While certainly not exhaustive of necessary elements for Christian living, spiritual formation, community, and scripture form a foundation from which nearly all that is necessary can emerge. In fact, one might even argue that these are the basic ingredients that have given birth and shaped every major movement within historical Christianity in its two-thousand-plus years of existence. Of course, the goal of this chapter has been more meager, that of simply demonstrating their biblical and theological congruity,

¹²⁴ See “An Exegesis of Colossians 3:15-16 (Community).”

dependence, and collective necessity on and with one another in the formation of Christlikeness. It is only through understanding and collectively utilizing these three essential elements that “teaching [people] to obey everything [Jesus has] commanded” is possible (Matt 28:20a).

CHAPTER THREE

Method

Introduction

A need was identified for the small group ministry of Eastwood Baptist Church in Gatesville, Texas to deepen its awareness of God through prioritizing Christian spiritual formation in its regular meetings. It was determined that doing this would require an emphasis on an experiential framework aimed at spiritual growth that complimented and balanced its existing programmatic context focused on group assimilation and numerical growth. The purpose of this project was to provide a formational process for small group members that would result in an increased communal awareness of God's presence and effort to respond to his promptings.

Description of Intervention

The intervention provided participants with exposure to specific spiritual disciplines that Christians have historically practiced to increase awareness and response to God, and facilitated communal engagement with them over the course of six small group meetings. Throughout the process, assessment was made via guided journaling and pre-test/post-test intervention questionnaires.

The first two sessions were largely informational in nature and introduced participants to the individual elements and practicalities of *lectio divina* (the researcher's preferred term, "spiritual reading," was utilized throughout the intervention).¹ In session one, participants received verbal and video instruction based on a handout that

¹ See "Definitions" in Chapter 1 for a description of *lectio divina* and its role in the overall project.

familiarized them with the elements of silence/solitude, meditation, listening, and responding as Christian spiritual disciplines. Toward the end of the session, participants were guided in a brief meditation that combined these individual elements in practice. The session concluded with guided journaling about their experience. The desired outcome for the session was for participants to recognize the value of the aforementioned elements in fostering an awareness of God (see Appendix A for session one materials). The second session included verbal instruction based on a handout detailing the practicalities of engaging in the previously introduced spiritual disciplines within the practice of spiritual reading. Toward the end of the session, participants were guided in a brief spiritual reading that demonstrated the practical points made in the instruction, followed by guided journaling about their experience. The desired outcome for this session was for participants to differentiate spiritual reading from other Bible study methods and understand the value of practicing it in a communal setting (see Appendix B for session two materials).

Sessions three through five were largely experiential, but were based on the instructions from the first two sessions. The desired outcome for each session was for participants to recognize God's presence, respond to his promptings, and acknowledge his activity in the lives of others through engaging in an extended period of spiritual reading in the context of a small group. In each session, a passage of scripture was introduced, followed by a time of preparation for and engagement in spiritual reading based on the specific passage. Brief moments were allowed for participants to audibly respond with words, phrases, and invitations they might have received from God.

Following the spiritual reading, participants engaged in guided journaling about the experience (see Appendix C, D, and E for materials used in sessions three through five).

Session six followed a similar format as the previous three; however, rather than utilizing a passage of scripture in the process of spiritual reading, it promoted engagement with life events through group spiritual guidance. The same goals of recognizing God's presence and promptings were retained, but with the added emphasis of experiencing it through life events within community. Following a time of preparation and prayer, participants were guided in identifying and reviewing a recent life event they felt drawn to by God. Brief moments were allowed for participants to audibly respond with words, phrases, and invitations they might have received. Following the spiritual guidance, participants engaged in guided journaling about the experience (see Appendix F for materials used in session six).

Research Questions

The research of this project sought to determine how providing exposure to the spiritual disciplines included in the practice of *lectio divina* affected participants' active engagement with Christian spiritual formation. The intervention sought to increase awareness of God's presence and promptings in the context of communal relationships. The desired result was that this project might not only transform the way individuals relate and respond to God on a superficial level, but also the depth of their Christian character as a whole. The main research question for this project's purpose was: What effect did exposing small group members to *lectio divina* have on the facilitation of Christian spiritual formation? Sub-questions were structured similarly, but addressed specific behaviors: What effect did exposing small group members to *lectio divina* have

on their awareness of God, the way they respond to God, pray, experience the Bible, understand life-events, mirror Jesus' example, and listen and respond to others.

Description of the Method

The method used for this project involved qualitative research. This was chosen due to the intervention's focus on participants' experiences and understandings both in process, as well as in the final outcome. The researcher hoped this would allow him to understand multiple realities as they were described and understood by the participants, as opposed to one defined by a source outside of the participants.² The research was primarily accomplished through a pre-test/post-test that was administered before and after the intervention by the researcher (see Appendix G) to determine the overall effect of the process. In addition, at the conclusion of each one of the six sessions mentioned above, a guided journal sheet was distributed, completed, and collected for evaluation at the end of the intervention.

Role of the Researcher

In the course of the qualitative research employed by this project, the researcher gathered data from the participants through the natural place of setting for the intervention.³ This place was the location in which a specific small group of Eastwood Baptist Church meets regularly: the home of two church members. The researcher provided the participants with all spoken, written, and video instruction in introductory sessions to prepare them to engage in the *lectio divina process* facilitated by the

² John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 195.

³ Ibid., 178.

researcher in subsequent sessions. All materials for these sessions were developed and/or utilized by the researcher for the purpose of this project and are included in the following appendices.

The Sample

The sample was purposive, criterion based, and drawn from people that have attended a small group of Eastwood Baptist Church. The intervention involved eight people that a deacon of Eastwood Baptist Church selected and determined to be regular small group attendees, and as diverse as possible given the former criterion. Because the researcher was both the principal investigator and pastor of the church that the small group was a part of, the deacon was given final authority to invite participants to participate in order to avoid the researcher's bias and indirect influence in the selection process. The invitation for them to participate was given orally at the conclusion of a regular small group meeting.

Entering the Field

As the pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church, the researcher had a presence in the field in which the research took place since the time his service began in August of 2010. Awareness of the proposed formal research was made public via a church business meeting and permission for him to pursue it was granted through the affirmation of a written statement signed by the church secretary (see Appendix H).

Data Collection

The data collection for this project was planned in such a way as to allow the researcher to engage in multiple observations throughout the course of the study.⁴ The pre-test/post-test included several questions indicative of a highly prioritized spiritual formation in which participants responded using an assigned identification number and was administered via pen and paper. On the first part participants responded to statements on a sliding scale ranging from “Always” to “Never.” The second part included four open-ended statements/questions in which participants were asked to respond to in detail. The pre-test was administered at the beginning of the first session of the intervention by the researcher, before any instruction was given concerning the subject matter to be covered in it or subsequent sessions. These were stored in individual folders corresponding with each participant in the researcher’s office. The post-test was identical to the pre-test and was administered by the researcher following the conclusion of the sixth session and stored with the pre-test for evaluation after the intervention was complete. This process was followed to assess the extent that the intervention enabled the small group to understand and engage in spiritual formation.

At the end of each session in the intervention, participants participated in guided journaling over particular spiritual practice(s) they experienced and were asked to respond to four open-ended statements/questions in detail. This process was employed to allow participants to reflect on their feelings about God’s presence and activity throughout the project, with the intention of giving insight into their growing understanding and practice of spiritual formation from the beginning to the end of the

⁴ Creswell, 181.

intervention. These were also stored in the participants' folders for the duration of the intervention and administered via pencil and paper.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the pre-test/post-test and guided journal responses provided by the participants at the end of the intervention. He observed the qualitative answers to the data collection instruments described above by noting changes and themes evidenced throughout the responses for each individual participant. He then sought to identify the cause of these as experienced through the intervention.

Reporting the Results

Because qualitative data is based on individual understandings, responses, and experiences, it was more expedient to report the results of this project in a descriptive, narrative form as opposed to a scientific report.⁵ The researcher did this by examining the responses to the pre-test/post-test and journal entries and attempting to find recognizable certainties that appeared to be true for all participants.

Validity and Reliability

The responsibility of ensuring that the research findings were valid and reliable belonged to the researcher. To ensure this, he engaged in a multiple of methods that are recognized as appropriate measures for doing so.

One of the primary methods of ensuring validity was the *triangulation of different data sources*. When themes can be discovered and established from multiple sources and

⁵ Creswell, 200.

perspectives, it can be understood as adding credibility to a study.⁶ The researcher sought to do this by drawing information from a pre-test, a post-test, and guided journal entries. Data collection occurred throughout the course of the project and was examined by the researcher upon completion. The researcher stored each collected item in the participants' individual folders in his office. Only after the completion of the intervention and the collection of all data did the researcher analyze it and report on his findings.

After all the responses were collected and in the possession of the researcher, he examined the evidence for emerging, consistent themes present for all participants in their responses. The utilization of *rich, thick descriptions* was employed when reporting these results in an effort to orient readers to the overall shared experience of the intervention. When qualitative researchers detail the setting and various perspectives highlighted throughout the course of a research project, the results become more believable and full.⁷ In addition to describing consistent themes that seemed to solve the researcher's identified problem, he also pointed out *discrepant information that countered the identified themes*. This tactic acknowledges the complex truth that reality is composed of many perspectives that do not always fit together. Recognizing contrary evidence makes research more realistic, and therefore, valid.⁸ As both the pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church and a member of the small group ministry in which the intervention took place, the researcher has *spent prolonged time in the field* where the research occurred. This has provided him a unique understanding that he believes enabled

⁶ Creswell, 191.

⁷ Ibid., 192.

⁸ Ibid.

him to communicate details about the site and the people involved, which further substantiate his narrative account of the intervention and lend accuracy to his findings.⁹

It must be acknowledged that the researcher's connection with the particular setting and individual participants created the potential for researcher bias. It was the researcher's hope that the individuals, group, and church involved in the intervention was changed for the better as a result of the overall project. His awareness and recognition of this, as well as the possibility of additional biases in which he was unaware, encouraged him be honest in his assessment of the results of the qualitative research he has designed.¹⁰ By utilizing the strategies described above, namely triangulation and the presentation of discrepant information, the researcher hoped to control for any biases in his research report.

Due to the researcher's active role as pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church and his regular participation in the small group ministry where research was conducted, it was possible for responses of subjects to be affected by his presence and their relationship to him. Through previous sermons, teaching, small group leadership, and informal conversation, the researcher may have exercised influence prior to the intervention that resulted in participants responding toward his desired outcome. This may need to be considered when reading the researcher's report of his findings.

Ethical Issues

⁹ Creswell, 192.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Due to the personal nature of the research project that involved participants sharing sensitive information about spiritual views and experiences, the researcher considered all ethical issues relative to the participants and their protection as human subjects. The researcher took on the responsibility of developing trust with participants, ensuring the integrity of the research, and guarding against any possible misconduct and impropriety that could have been understood as directed against them and/or associated with Baylor University and George W. Truett Theological Seminary.¹¹

Before engaging in any research, the researcher submitted a proposal to the institutional review board (IRB) at Baylor University for approval. Doing so required assessing the risk for physical, psychological, social, economic, or legal harm involved in participating as a subject in the study.¹² The researcher ensured that the rights, needs, values, and desires of subjects were respected and considered first when decisions were made regarding data use and reporting. All participants completed an informed consent document (see Appendix I) that specified the research objectives and data collection tools and activities that were involved, as well as how the data would be stored, protected and used. Participants were also informed that pseudonyms would be used in reporting the findings of the research project, but that there was still a possibility that a breach of confidentiality and/or anonymity may occur.

All information related to this research has been kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. Electronic data has been stored on an encrypted password

¹¹ Creswell, 87.

¹² Ibid., 89.

protected computer and will be destroyed after three years. All data is accessible only to the researcher.

Throughout the course of the project, the researcher exercised utmost care to ensure integrity in the reporting of intervention results. He did this by being aware of his personal biases and the possibility of unknown biases, and sought to communicate and facilitate the project objectively. No deception was used in reporting the findings to fit his desired outcome. To the best of the researcher's understanding, it does not seem that anyone was or could be harmed by reporting the results of this project.

CHAPTER FOUR

Summary of Results

Introduction

The researcher identified a need for the small group ministry of Eastwood Baptist Church in Gatesville, Texas to deepen its awareness of God through prioritizing specific practices that support Christian spiritual formation in its regular meetings. It is his belief that an intentional process of spiritual formation has inadvertently been neglected within the church due to its geographical and historical context, and that communal exposure and instruction might balance the congregations' inherited prevailing ethos centered mainly on numerical growth and group assimilation. The purpose of this project has been to provide a spiritually formative process for small group members that encouraged and increased a shared awareness of God's presence and effort to respond to his perceived promptings. This was facilitated by providing exposure to a Christian practice called *lectio divina* and highlighting individual spiritual disciplines inherent within it. The intervention attempted to provide a communal setting where reflection via guided journaling could be recorded following group engagement with *lectio divina*. The research of the project, consisting of the aforementioned guided journaling and a pre/post-test taken before and following the intervention, sought to determine the effect that exposure to *lectio divina* had on the small group members of Eastwood Baptist Church.

The main research question for testing the effectiveness of this project's purpose was: What effect did exposing small group members to *lectio divina* have on the

facilitation of Christian spiritual formation? Sub-questions were structured similarly, but addressed specific behaviors: What effect did exposing small group members to *lectio divina* have on their awareness of God, the way they respond to God, pray, experience the Bible, understand life-events, mirror Jesus' example, and listen and respond to others. The researcher drew those participating in the study from the congregation of Eastwood Baptist Church. The intervention involved eight people that a deacon of Eastwood Baptist Church selected and determined to be regular small group attendees, and as diverse as possible given the former criterion. Because the researcher was both the principal investigator and pastor of the church that the research group was a part of, the deacon was given final authority to invite participants to participate in order to avoid the researcher's bias and indirect influence in the selection process. The invitation for them to participate was given orally at the conclusion of a regular small group meeting.

The Participants

The participants included three males and five females that ranged in age from 23-70 years of age. The following pseudonyms will be used to represent these demographics: Cory (24/M), Shannon (23/F), Nichole (44/F), Tom (70/M), Lucy (60/F), Claire (42/F), Terry (53/M), Cindy (36/F).

The Process

After each participant's confirmation of their participation, a date range for the intervention was agreed upon, with the understanding that the group would meet once a week for six sessions. At the beginning of session one, the researcher introduced the participants to the requirements of the intervention and took time to discuss any questions

regarding it. Following this time, each participant signed the consent form that had been provided to them in electronic and physical forms. Each person was then assigned a random identification number that allowed the researcher to keep track of their information, which he later matched with a pseudonym. Next, all participants completed the pre-test, which was given to and filed by the researcher until the conclusion of the intervention.

For the instructional duration of session one, participants received verbal and video instruction based on a handout that familiarized them with the elements of silence/solitude, meditation, listening, and responding as Christian spiritual disciplines. Toward the end of the session, participants were guided in a brief mediation that combined these individual elements in practice. The session concluded with guided journaling about their experience that was given to and filed by the researcher. The second session included verbal instruction based on a handout detailing the practicalities of engaging in the previously introduced spiritual disciplines within the practice of *lectio divina* (the researcher's preferred term, "spiritual reading," was used throughout the intervention). Toward the end of the session, participants were guided in a brief spiritual reading exercise that demonstrated the practical points made in the instruction, followed by guided journaling about their experience that was given to and filed by the researcher.

Sessions three through five were largely experiential, but were based on the instructions from the first two sessions. In each session, a passage of scripture was introduced, followed by a time of preparation for and engagement in spiritual reading based on the specific passage. Brief moments were allowed for participants to audibly respond with words, phrases, and invitations they might have received from God.

Following the spiritual reading, participants engaged in guided journaling about the experience that was given to and filed by the researcher.

Session six followed a similar format as the previous three; however, rather than utilizing a passage of scripture in the process of spiritual reading, it promoted engagement with life events through group spiritual guidance. Following a time of preparation and prayer, participants were guided in identifying and reviewing a recent life event they felt drawn to by God. Brief moments were allowed for participants to audibly respond with words, phrases, and invitations they might have received. Following the spiritual guidance, participants engaged in guided journaling about the experience and then completed the post-test, both of which were given to and filed by the researcher. The remainder of this chapter will disclose the findings of this study.

Pre-Intervention Findings

Finding One

The first pre-intervention finding was that participants showed little awareness of, and intentional engagement with, being spiritually formed by the Holy Spirit. While seven out of eight participants indicated that they “always” or “usually” respond to what they think God wants them to do on the pre-test, five out of eight participants indicated that they only reflect Jesus’ teaching and example “half-of-the-time” or less. Of these five, four were included in the group that affirmed “always” or “usually” responding to what God wants them to do. While these assertions are not synonymous, if a person affirms one of them, he/she should generally be able to affirm the other to a similar degree. Most of the group’s failure to affirm reflecting Jesus’ teaching and example more than “half-of-the-time” at least indicates that the overall goal of spiritual formation is not

coming to fruition in their lives. Furthermore, the failure of half the group to associate responding to what God wants them to do with reflecting Jesus' teaching and example indicates a flawed understanding, or at least, confusion regarding what it means to be spiritually formed by the Holy Spirit.

This can be seen in Lucy's attribution of God's influence over her thoughts and actions to the fact that her parents made her attend church while she was growing up. While she affirmed that "I think of God several times a day based on my relationship with him," she elaborated on this relationship by stating that "I grew up with God, not seeking him." Nichole responded similarly by affirming that "God is always influencing my thoughts or actions . . . I attribute this to being raised in the church by a Christian family." Other responses tended to be focused almost completely on human effort. Tom stated that he attributes God's influence in his life to his tendency to "try to think of 'What Would Jesus Do' in most circumstances." Terry's response was nearly identical: "Almost all of my thoughts and actions are premeditated with 'WWJD' or something to that affect." The only response that attributed God's influence in one's life to the Holy Spirit or the presence of God came from Cory, of which he said "sanctifies and calls me to be better." Cory serves as the church's youth minister and is a full-time seminary student at an institution that requires training in spiritual formation, which could possibly be the cause for his exception in this case and in others throughout the findings of this intervention.

Finding One is also supported in the way, or the lack thereof, participants participated in reading the Bible. While their lack of Bible reading in and of itself is not indicative of a lack of spiritual formation, it demonstrates failure by the group to avail

themselves to a discipline by which spiritual formation can occur. Most of the participants reported reading the Bible a couple of times per week or less. Again, one of the exceptions was Cory, who reported reading the Bible “‘spiritually’ and ‘contemplatively’ most days,” and “‘academically’ or in preparation of vocational ministry several days.” The other exception came from Terry, who described his Bible reading to range from “2-7 times a week.” Most participants omitted any explicit expectation of God speaking to or guiding them through the Bible, and described their Bible reading to be mainly centered on gaining information and/or making applications to their individual lives. Shannon reported that “as I read [the Bible], my joy and understanding concerning my Christian journey increase.” Nichole stated that “I mostly read the Bible when I am in Bible Study or when having a biblical discussion with my children or a friend . . . The parts of the bible I enjoy reading are when the story can be given practical life application.” Lucy describes reading the Bible once or twice a week “when I’m on a search for something.” One exception came from Tom, whom in addition to trying to understand the context and historical significance of a text when he reads the Bible, reported that he considers “What does God want for me in this revelation? How does it affect my life? What can I do to please God?” The other came from Cindy who admitted that in her failure to read the Bible very often, “it is hard to find time without distractions to focus on God’s word and let it speak to me.” Half of the group reported that God speaks to them through the bible half-of-the-time or less.

In addition to the lack of utilizing scripture for the purpose of intentional engagement with the process of spiritual formation, and the group’s failure to affirm reflecting Jesus’ teaching and example and/or to connect doing so to responding to what

they think God wants them to do, the researcher noticed that most of the group's understanding of community also supports Finding One. While six out of eight participants reported recognizing and responding to God's involvement in the lives of others "usually" or "always," and all participants reported doing so "half-of-the-time" or more, most of the participants (five out of eight) indicated that they understood Christian community to function similar to a support group that provided mutual encouragement, support, correction, etc., with little-to-no mention of God's presence in the process.

Lucy shared that "my church family is close and faithful. That helps keep me on the right path." Claire responded similarly, noting: "I think it is very important to surround yourself with other Christians – to lift you up . . . As humans we are so easily tempted by worldly behavior – it is critical to have fellow believers that want to be on the same path as you." Others, like Nichole and Terry, wrote of God "[using] friends, family, and daily relationships to guide and inform," and "[placing] [Christians] in my path when I need them," but were vague regarding God's presence within others and their expectations regarding encountering God in community. One exception came from Cory, who described his relationship with God as being "vertical (concerning a 'personal relationship') and horizontal (being part of the church, universal and local)," and that "without the Church, my relationship with God is missing an essential quality of what it means to be a Christian and a member of the Kingdom of God." Another came from Tom, who simply noted that "[Other Christians'] experiences with God affirm His presence and what we need to do, how we should act."

One observation that seems to contradict Finding One, or at least, call it into question, is that all participants reported that they pray on a daily basis on the pre-test. In

addition, five out of eight participants indicated that their prayers are meaningful more than “half-of-the-time.” When asked about their motivations for prayer, however, all participants admitted that their prayers are largely dictated by circumstances, consist mainly of requests or giving thanks for granted requests, and/or are performed out of a desire to feel closer to God. The only response that explicitly connected prayer with spiritual formation (or what it produces – character formation) came from Terry, who admitted that “occasionally I’m bold enough to ask for guidance and building of personal character, but most of my prayers are of hope and requests for intervention and assurance that [God] knows my needs and requests.” Cory gave the only other unusual answer which stated that in addition to petitionary prayer, “the other half of the time, my prayers are more ascetic in which I reflect and sit passively.” This certainly describes a posture that seems more open to spiritual formation than the other responses, but includes nothing that explicitly states that as his motivation.

The researcher found interesting, that in spite of the above material in support of Finding One, six out of eight participants indicated experiencing God’s presence and guidance “usually” or “always.” While nothing can explicitly be pointed to in the pre-test that counters this, it can be said with certainty that this indicated experience did not lead most in the group to be spiritually formed by the Holy Spirit.

Finding Two

The second pre-intervention finding was that participants valued the practice of reading scripture. In spite of their general lack of reading the Bible often or doing so to be spiritually formed, all participants indicated that they valued the practice of reading scripture for various reasons. For Claire, this value was ascribed not from reading the

Bible as a stand-alone text, but as it is printed in a daily devotional that she said “gives me a sense of ‘completeness.’” She went on to state that “the times I may not have time to complete [the devotional] – my whole day is just ‘off.’” Cindy admitted to going “days and weeks without reading [the Bible],” but affirmed that when she finds the time to at least listen to it, she often learns new things, even when she is unable to “focus on God’s word and let it speak to [her].” Terry recognized the value of reading scripture as a regular spiritual discipline, but admitted that he is less organized and rigid in utilizing it as one as he was 10-15 years ago. While the personal value placed upon reading scripture varied, and most of it differed from the emphasis placed upon it by this project, it is evident that participants did not report a lack in reading scripture or utilizing it in the process of spiritual formation due to having a negative perception towards it or the practice of reading it.

Finding Three

The third pre-intervention finding was that participants perceived community as a potential help in everyday circumstances. While most participants lacked a theological understanding of community, especially in regards to its role in spiritual formation, all perceived it as being practically helpful in everyday life, in either religious or temporal affairs. Shannon reported that “I am more motivated to work on my relationship with Christ when surrounded by a community of Christians.” Cindy similarly affirmed that “other Christians play a huge role in my connection with God. Through fellowship and conversation I am reminded that I am His child. I am encouraged and given a desire to strive to live pleasing to Him so that I can be a positive influence on those around me.” While being one of the few to recognize God’s presence in community, Tom also simply

noted from a personal standpoint that “I enjoy being around Christians.” Nichole adamantly affirmed that “I would not be here today if not for the support and encouragement of my family members who are Christians, my church family, and my co-workers who are Christians.”

Primary Findings

Finding One

The first primary finding was that exposure to *lectio divina* resulted in a strengthened awareness of and response to God’s promptings. While many participants initially indicated responding to what they think God wants them to do “always” or “usually,” as expressed in the above pre-intervention findings, examination of open-ended responses in their post-tests revealed that six out of eight grew in their recognition of responding to God from understanding it as being centered on Christian heritage and expected behavior, to experiencing it as being sensitive to God’s presence (i.e. the Holy Spirit).

Lucy omitted language about her Christian upbringing and noted that “I seldom do anything right or wrong that I don’t think about what [God] would think. I carry Him everywhere and I feel His presence.” Nichole likewise excluded her previous attribution of responding to God as “being raised in the church by a Christian family,” and instead wrote that “I always feel God’s presence and his will for me to be my best.” While admitting in both responses that she does not always choose to respond in ways that please God, in the post-test she was able to name specific things (“negativity, anger, etc.”) that sometimes keep her from doing so as being revealed to her by God. Tom went from describing God’s influence over his thoughts and actions as being due to his own

ability to frame situations by asking “What would Jesus do?” to saying that “God has a great deal of influence in my life . . . I think that the Holy Spirit makes me feel accountable.” Terry, whose initial response was similar to Tom’s, later affirmed that “[God] influences all thoughts and actions. Sometimes I don’t yield like I should but I’m always conscious of how does this affect my walk with Jesus?”

These post-test responses are supported by all of the participants’ experiences throughout the intervention as documented in their journals, which articulated receiving specific invitations from God that included: being aware of conflict one creates for herself, better utilizing time in retirement to be of service to God, seeking God’s help in losing weight, making peace with family members, letting go of resentment towards a parent, sharing a scripture with a friend going through a trial, trusting God more in the lives of one’s children, and many others.

One of the exceptions in this finding was Cory, who demonstrated a strong awareness of and response to God’s promptings at the outset of the intervention as mentioned above. The other was Cindy, who exhibited little awareness of God’s promptings in the pre-test, and stated rather uncertainly in the post-test: “I guess my thoughts and actions are mostly influenced by God. I attribute this to my desire to be good and have a positive influence on those around me.” While neither Cory nor Cindy demonstrated a strengthened awareness of or response to God’s promptings, both articulated receiving personal invitations from him throughout the intervention.

Finding Two

The second primary finding was that exposure to *lectio divina* resulted in a strong awareness of God’s presence and activity within community. Throughout the

intervention, all participants demonstrated a strong awareness of God's presence and activity within community through guided journals. Everyone did this by at least affirming in a general manner that God was speaking and/or working in the midst of the group at some point. Lucy wrote following the last session that "God has spoken to many here. Not everyone is ready for the message perhaps but sometimes it is the exercise and practice of the exercise that is important." During this same time, Claire generally observed that "God works in all of us in such unique ways – and all of our issues no matter how big or small are important to God."

Some people identified God's presence within community in more specific ways. Three people articulated sensing a message from God pertinent to the entire group. In reference to the groups' responses shared during a spiritual reading, Cory stated "together, I felt God reminding me that our weaknesses do not get to define us. Like Moses during his first encounter with God, we divert God's plan when we let our insecurities get in the way." Nichole shared a conviction that "we have nine people struggling with different trials that can all be made less of a burden on ourselves and others if we would turn them over to God." After affirming hearing the phrases people shared during one session of a spiritual reading, Claire expressed confidence on behalf of the group that "if we will just slow down and listen God will speak to us what he wants us to hear."

Five people expressed being given an awareness by God of suffering and struggles going on within the group. Cory recognized that "God is present in the suffering and celebration [of the group]. Though we typically reject hurt and pain as being 'other' and 'evil,' it can be beneficial and directive." Nichole stated that "the reading and

responses of others in our group reminded me of all the different types of struggles and obstacles we all face on a daily basis and how varied they are.” Perhaps the most spiritually intuitive came from Lucy, when describing her experience and awareness of God during the silent moments of a group spiritual reading, she said: “I felt many struggling around me and instinctively I wanted to help.”

Five people also recognized God’s presence and activity in the group through the various responses that others in the group gave to spiritual reading questions. Claire noted that “it is fascinating to see how personal and individual the responses everyone has. You can tell that God is speaking to each of us in a very different manner.” Lucy commented similarly that “every single person heard something different from the same passage as if this too was by divine appointment.” Interestingly, Shannon recognized God’s involvement in connecting the group in community through responses that were similar: “Many of the initial responses were the same or similar, which, once again, reinforces the fact that we are all connected as believers.”

While the guided journals demonstrate a strong awareness of God’s presence and activity within community during the intervention, the researcher could not determine whether the intervention resulted in an overall strengthened awareness of God’s presence and activity within community. Six out of eight participants indicated “always” or “usually” recognizing and responding to God’s involvement in the lives of others on both the pre and post-tests. When asked to describe the role that Christian community played in the way they relate and respond to God, five out of eight participants did not explicitly mention understanding God to be physically present within community on both the pre and post-tests. Two of those that did on the pre-test were consistent in their responses on

the post-test, and one omitted what he wrote on the pre-test about God's presence in community on the post-test. Perhaps a more pointed, open-ended question on the pre/post-tests would have yielded clearer responses in determining the overall effect of the intervention on participants' awareness of God's presence and activity within community.

Finding Three

The third primary finding was that exposure to *lectio divina* increased the quantity that participants reported reading the Bible, and the degree that they recognized God speaking to them through it. While six out of eight participants described their Bible reading to consist in occurring a couple of times a week or less on the pre-test, seven out of eight participants described an increase in quantity in which they read the Bible in the post-test. Shannon explained hers to be "at least, and sometimes only two times a week" on the pre-test. On the post-test, she omitted the minimalistic terms in her response: "I read the bible during times at church and I read it before work and pray over the message to utilize it throughout my day." Nichole wrote that "I mostly read the Bible when I am in Bible study or when having a biblical discussion with my children or a friend" in her pre-test. Following this statement, she explained it by noting "I'm not much of a reader to begin with. Unfortunately, I don't enjoy history." Her post-test response shows a considerable increase in reading quantity, supported by considerable interest: "I read the Bible a couple of times a week, sometimes more. If I come across a verse elsewhere I will often look up the accompanying verse or verses." Tom reported a concrete increase that went from "two to three times a week" in the pre-test to "three or four times weekly" in the post-test. Terry went from describing his Bible reading as occurring very

inconsistently throughout the week on the pre-test, to “usually daily.” The only participant that showed no increase at all came from Cindy, whose responses on both tests were very similar, indicating going weeks without reading the Bible outside of participating in group Bible studies and corporate worship.

In addition to these increases in the quantity that participants read their Bibles, they also demonstrated increases in experiencing God speak to them through it. On the pre-test, half of participants indicated that God speaks to them through the Bible “half-of-the-time” or less. On the post-test, six out of eight indicated that God speaks to them through the Bible “usually” or “always.” Overall, seven out of eight participants indicated some kind of increase in the degree that God speaks to them through the Bible. Most of these increases went from “half-of-the-time” to “usually” or “usually” to “always,” but Claire went from “seldom” to “half-of-the-time.” The biggest increase was reported by Terry, who went from “half-of-the-time” to “always.” Cindy was again the exception, having indicated that God speaks to her through the Bible “half-of-the-time” on both the pre and post-tests.

Evidence supporting these indications can be found in the journals of participants, seven out of eight of which used direct and definitive language to describe God speaking to them through scripture. Lucy remarked regarding her experience during one spiritual reading: “I tend to act on my own and not wait on God. He made it clear we will both be happier if I wait.” Cory affirmed an invitation from God following one session with these words: “I felt God call me to be humble, physically and spiritually. To kneel before those who are hurting and rejected and to provide them with love and tangible resources. To acknowledge that I haven’t quite figured all this stuff out and that my certainty can

function as a limitation.” Nichole discerned following one spiritual reading that “In the present and immediate future, God wants me to look to Him for help in forgiving others despite the chance that they may disappoint and/or anger me again.” In describing his experience during a time of silence with a group spiritual reading, Tom noted “I was profoundly aware that God said ‘my grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.’”

Claire was the only exception, who used slightly less direct language in her responses, but still recognized receiving something from God as a result of engaging in spiritual reading. Rather than stating something like “God told me to . . .” she often used the phrase “I feel that God wants me to . . .” throughout her journal.

Finding Four

The fourth primary finding was that exposure to *lectio divina* increased the degree to which the thoughts and actions of the participants reflected Jesus’ teaching and example. Five out of eight participants initially indicated that they reflect Jesus’ teaching and example half-of-the-time or less. On the post-test, six out of eight participants indicated doing so “usually” or “always.” Overall, five out of eight participants indicated an increase in reflecting Jesus’ teaching and example when individual responses on the pre and post-test were compared. The three that did not demonstrate an increase indicated that they “usually” reflect Jesus’ teaching and example on the pre-test. The likelihood that they would note an increase from “usually” to “always” (the next category on the sliding scale on which participants were asked to rank themselves) seems virtually impossible to the researcher, given the exalted status Christians attribute to Jesus. Most of

the increases documented moving from “half-of-time-time” to “usually,” although one person moved from “seldom” to “half-of-the-time.”

In addition to these indicators given on the survey, evidence for Finding Four is present in the open-ended responses referred to in this section under Finding One. In these answers, participants were responding to the following questions: “To what degree does God influence your thoughts and actions? What do you attribute this to?” While these prompts are not semantically synonymous with one’s thoughts reflecting Jesus’ teaching and example, the researcher recognizes apparent overlap in the concepts, and affirms that if God influences one’s thoughts and actions, he/she would most likely reflect Jesus’ teaching and example as well. All participants initially answered positively to these questions, but as mentioned under Finding One, six out of eight of the post-test responses demonstrated growth in the participants’ understanding of responding to God. They progressed from understanding it as being centered on Christian heritage and behavior, to experiencing it as being sensitive to God’s presence and promptings. To the extent that participants affirmed God’s influence over their thoughts and actions and attributed this to their awareness of his presence and promptings, the researcher recognizes an affirmation of their self-indicated increase of reflecting Jesus’ teaching and example in their thoughts and actions.

The participants’ journals support the above evidence by illustrating the cognitive and spiritual processes they engaged in that ultimately led to the noted increases. Four people wrote about being made aware of Jesus’ desire/ability to remove things that keep them from more accurately reflecting his teachings and examples in their thoughts and actions. Following Claire’s description of a phrase spoken by Jesus during a spiritual

reading (“Woman, you are set free”) as having grabbed her attention, she reflected: “I feel that [Jesus] wants me to let go of the issues that ‘cripple’ me.” Cindy made another observation about the same passage: “I love that Jesus saw the woman and called out to her. She didn’t appear to be there for healing but He saw her and set her free.” She further reflects upon these comments, noting “I was reminded that [Jesus] sees me. He knows my heart . . . I also feel that I need to assess the things that ‘bind’ me from having a more personal relationship with Him and reflecting his presence.”

Three people journaled about their growing awareness of needing to make time and space for Jesus to point out things that do not reflect him in their lives. Following a guided meditation on a passage of scripture, Cory remarked that “this experience reminded me to be forthright and candid about my shortcomings and struggles while continuing to seek Christ to the best of my ability.” Nichole similarly noted that “the overall experience showed me the need for making times of solitude available in my life so that Jesus can speak to me more frequently and easily about not only things on my heart, but also other things He may want me to know, do, or change.”

Following the first spiritual reading the group engaged in, Nichole stated that “the scripture reading and time of silence gave me a sense of peace not only of [Christ’s] presence, but also his willingness to help direct my life.” After the last group session, Shannon wrote “It opened my eyes to how much conflict I create in my own life because I ignore the call from God to live Christlike daily.”

Secondary Findings

Finding One

The first of the secondary findings was that exposure to *lectio divina* led participants to experience feelings of peace. Six out of eight participants reported experiencing peace during or after the intervention in their journals. Two responses were in reference to a specific situation that a participant was facing. Cory noted this about his experience and awareness of God during a group spiritual reading in session five: “I felt a present peace about my current situation; an assurance that things will be ok.” Tom wrote in reference to this same moment that “I can hear God telling me it’s OK. This despair will pass and I have provided you with sufficient grace to get through it.”

Three experiences of peace were not only prompted during a time of silence, but participants specifically mentioned practicing silence as being actively responsible for their feelings of peace. Nichole simply noted following session one that “the silent meditation was peaceful,” and again after the next session that “the scripture reading and time of silence gave me a sense of peace not only of his presence, but also his willingness to help direct my life.” Cory stated following session one that “during this time [of silence], I felt an increased awareness and closeness to God. The busyness of life and the anxious thoughts that accompany it were able to fade away as I focused more clearly.”

Two journal responses tied a sense of peace to what individuals were experiencing in community during the intervention. In describing her experience and awareness of God when utilizing part of a psalm in prayer, Shannon attested that “I felt close to [God], in that, I felt close to those around me. The sense of community with other children of God focused on the same verse and message brought peace and another

form of closeness to God.” Lucy described a similar moment during a spiritual reading in session five, part of which was mentioned under Primary Finding Two, by saying “I felt many struggling around me and instinctively I wanted to help. God reminded me of the peace and contentment I feel and I feel he led me to the part of the scripture I chose.”

Finding Two

The second of the secondary findings was that exposure to *lectio divina* led participants to experience empathy for others. Seven out of eight participants described experiencing empathy at least once during the intervention in their journals. Four of these responses were experienced as an invitation from God to recognize others’ unique situations and to respond in certain ways toward them. Terry noted recognizing that “others in the group are also going through heartbreaking things . . . and [I] need to share my own experience with them.” Cory’s response, already recorded under Primary Finding Three regarding an invitation to humble himself physically and spiritually and to submit to and serve people who are hurting and rejected, is also pertinent to this finding. Tom provided two responses indicating invitations to express and demonstrate empathy that speak of being “less aware of ‘rules’ and more empathetic to people’s needs” and helping “alleviate others’ suffering whenever [I] can.” Tom was unique in that he also demonstrated an increase in his awareness of empathy on the post-test when asked about the role of community in the way he responds to God. While initially he only described community as being something that affirms God’s presence for Him, following the intervention he stated that he responds to God through community by relating “to how other Christians are suffering or their triumphs. I feel empathy for them and pray for them and try to help if I can.”

Five of these responses were prompted by audible words from other group members during spiritual readings. After listening to specific situations group members were struggling to discern God's presence in, Lucy noted recognizing that "God is present in all our lives and . . . I wanted to help assure others that it will all work out once they give the control to God." Terry simply affirmed that "I am thankful to hear others' perspectives – it helps me understand them better." Shannon similarly commented that "the group responses led me further in my walk with God and allowed me to reflect on experiences other individuals had and how God has shaped them through such experiences."

Finally, two of the responses demonstrating a sense of empathy were given when a participant was describing her experience and awareness of God during a silent moment in a group spiritual reading. In one of them, Lucy describes an imagined scene where God shows up at the home of a veteran she regularly visits as part of her job. In the other, she speaks of feeling others in the group struggling, as is detailed under Finding One of this section where the response is quoted in full.

Finding Three

The third of the secondary findings was that exposure to *lectio divina* led participants to recognize a need to submit to God. To some degree, all participants demonstrated a recognized need to submit to God in their journal responses during the intervention. Five responses were centered on weaknesses and suffering. Terry expressed an invitation from God "to live each day in habitual weakness – to surrender to his power – and to boast in Him because of His power." Tom recognized a similar, but more simplified invitation during this moment to "relax and trust [God]." Nichole felt a

prompting to “seek [God’s] help with daily trials instead of trying to handle them on [her] own.”

Four journal responses dealt with the connected issues of waiting, patience, and control. During a spiritual reading, Lucy described understanding what was read to convey that “we must be patient and wait for God’s timing and not proceed on our own.” When asked to describe how a spiritual reading highlighted God’s involvement in her life, Claire explained: “I am a very impatient person who likes having control. God sees this weakness and I feel wants me to work on this area. I need to wait for direction from God before just thinking I can handle things on my own.” Shannon recognized similarly that “the spiritual reading questions made me realize how much I take control of, rather than relinquish control of, my life to God.”

Three journal responses articulated struggling with issues of trust. Writing about her struggle to experience God through scripture and to sense invitations during group spiritual readings, Cindy expressed “it is encouraging to read about others who have felt somewhat abandoned by God at times. Also to be reminded of the hope that is gained through trusting. I really did not sense a specific invitation this week. I know I need to keep trusting that God is with me, that he hears me and know my heart.” During the same session, Nichole recorded that “the scripture reminds us to always trust in God even when times are what seem to be our worst. Recently I have been more aware of God’s willingness to take on the burden of things we absolutely cannot handle on our own. I have been more willing to truly turn some of those things fully over to Him because there is far too much right now and in order to keep functioning on a daily basis I must do this.” Tom more simply noted an invitation from God to “relax and trust Him.”

Conclusion

This project accomplished its stated purpose in engaging small group members in a process of spiritual formation that resulted in an overall heightened awareness of God and increased effort to respond to his guidance. Utilizing the process of *lectio divina* familiarized participants with various spiritual practices that heightened openness to experiencing God speak through scripture. One of the cumulative results of this was that participants not only reported an increase in experiencing God speak to them through the Bible, but also in the frequency in which they spent time reading the Bible. The small group setting in which the project was carried out adequately supported the project's emphasis on recognizing God's presence and activity by helping participant's highlight the unique way he abides and works within community throughout the intervention. Unfortunately, it could not definitively be determined from the research whether the intervention resulted in an overall increase of the participants' awareness of God's presence and activity within community. At any rate, it can be stated that the project ultimately resulted in increased evidence of spiritual formation among the group, as the post-tests and journals affirm an increase in what the overall result of spiritual formation has proven to be (character formation). Furthermore, the project proved valuable as it helped participants progress from understanding scripture and community as aids for common problems, to sacred expressions that God embodies and uses for divine purposes. In addition, while outside the immediate purposes of the project, participants discovered that the feelings that accompanied their participation in the intervention supported and enhanced engagement with God and others in the process of spiritual formation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Reflection

Summary of Significant Findings

This project sought to provide initial engagement in the process of Christian spiritual formation to small group participants by exposing them to the disciplines inherent in the ancient Christian practice of *lectio divina*. The pre-test confirmed the researcher's initial assessment for the need of small group members at his church to deepen their awareness of God through prioritizing Christian spiritual formation in its regular meetings. The intervention sought to determine whether exposure to *lectio divina* would result in an increased awareness and response to God, and if doing so would give evidence of character formation on behalf of the participants. The main research question for testing the effectiveness of this project's purpose was: What effect did exposing small group members to *lectio divina* have on the facilitation of Christian spiritual formation? Sub-questions were structured similarly, but addressed specific behaviors: What effect did exposing small group members to *lectio divina* have on their awareness of God, the way they respond to God, pray, experience the Bible, understand life-events, mirror Jesus' example, and listen and respond to others.

The pre-test found that participants showed little recognition of, and intentional engagement with the process of spiritual formation, as hinted at above. This was evident in the fact that while claiming to have an awareness of God and to respond to his promptings, most participants did not reflect Jesus' teaching and example in their lives very often. In addition, participants affirmed that they generally valued elements deemed

by the project to be intrinsic to spiritual formation (i.e. community and scripture), but for the more utilitarian purpose of providing help in daily life. Participants' failure to recognize scripture's role or to utilize it in the process of spiritual formation was demonstrated in their lack of reading the Bible much more than a couple times a week (mostly in group Bible study and worship), and an admission that their limited engagement with it was mostly centered upon informational purposes. Likewise, participants' understanding of and participation in community served less as a means to point them to God and his activity in their midst, and more as a support group that provided mutual care and encouragement in regards to both spiritual and secular issues.

Following the intervention, the post-test revealed that most participants' awareness of and response to God's promptings in their lives was strengthened. They demonstrated this by using language that referenced responding to God through being prompted by him, his presence, and/or the Holy Spirit, as opposed to describing responding to his promptings as being connected to attending church, following rules, or mimicking expected behavior like participants did on the pre-test. Supporting this demonstrated increase were numerous journal responses from nearly all participants that documented receiving specific invitations from God throughout the intervention. In addition to this individual awareness apparent in the post-test and supported by journal entries, written journal responses also indicated a strong awareness of God's presence and activity within community throughout the course of the intervention. This was expressed through recognizing the uniqueness/differences in individual responses to scripture, an awareness of God's activity in the midst of sufferings and trials experienced

by the group, and messages understood as being received from God pertaining to the group.

Additional increases evident from the post-test included how much participants reported reading the Bible and the degree to which God speaks to them through it. Journal responses following engagement with scripture evidence this growing awareness the participants had of God speaking through it with strong, indicative phrases consisting of “I felt God call me,” “God wants me to,” and “God said.” The post-test also documented increases in the degree to which the thoughts and actions of the participants reflect Jesus’ teaching and example. The logical possibility of these increases were supported by the open-ended responses on the post-test mentioned above that document an increase of participants responding to God due to being prompted by him, his presence, and/or the Holy Spirit.

Secondary findings resulting from the intervention came from the journal responses of participants that indicated involvement in the intervention as leading to feelings of peace, empathy for others, and recognizing a need to submit to God. While these findings do not express explicit goals for performing the project, the researcher finds them to have been helpful and supportive of its overall purpose.

Theological Significance

Spiritual Formation

Key in the theological significance of this project is Dallas Willard’s understanding of spiritual formation as something that happens to all people.¹ It was the

¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 19. See “Theological Reflections on Spiritual Formation” in Chapter 2 for elaboration.

researcher's contention that participants were in need of being exposed to practices conducive to helping them participate in Christian spiritual formation. Their lack of emphases within the programs, training, studies, etc. they had become accustomed to participating in did not result in a neutral outcome that had no effect on the way their character was formed. On the contrary, spiritual formation happened in their lives in spite of their lack of attention to it, and rather than having Christ formed in them (Gal 4:19) in a way that resulted in recognizing and responding to God, participants sought to act in ways they deemed to be "Christian" based on their own understandings of Jesus, participation in church, and/or moral upbringing.

Rather than beginning with behavior, the theological impact of the project is evident in its emphasis on what Willard would refer to as the heart/spirit/will, the core of the person that governs all that takes place.² As participants engaged with the spiritual disciplines inherent in the practice of *lectio divina*, God's presence was experienced and his promptings were received through the Holy Spirit that proved over time to shape the soul, or the deepest part of participants, which ultimately resulted in their lives increasingly reflecting Christ in thought and deed.³ This process should accurately be understood neither as something that participants achieved through more accurately focused attention or effort, nor as a situation in which the Holy Spirit acted upon passive subjects; but rather, as a combination of activity made possible by God's character and initiative, where people cooperatively interacted with him through spiritual disciplines involving the mind and body.⁴

² Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 29-34.

³ Ibid., 37.

Community

This project was purposely designed and implemented within the context of Christian community. This was not simply because, as initially recognized by the participants, such an environment provides mutual accountability, encouragement, support, etc. On the contrary, the project understood that Christ dwells in community uniquely and can be specifically experienced through corporate engagement in spiritual disciplines (Col 3:15-16). The project recognized this most acutely in Bonhoeffer's writings, which affirm that the Gospel and the life that it makes available and intends for people can only fully be understood and received in the physical and sociological reality of the church.⁵ Bonhoeffer understood the individual and community to both have a role in shaping one another, which when considered alongside what has already been stated regarding spiritual formation, affirms the possibility of Christians being Christ to and with one another as they are formed together in his likeness.

While certainly not demonstrating an awareness of the above reality at the outset of the intervention, or an explicit growth in understanding it on a cognitive level as a result of the intervention, participants seemed to at least embody and articulate participation in communal formation as they wrote about their awareness of God speaking to others, receiving messages from God for others, and noticing him in the midst of specific situations as the group engaged in the intervention together. Indeed, community was intrinsic to the design of the project due to the researcher having it take

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding how God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 67-68.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4, Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., ed., Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 150.

place within the context of a small group. On the other hand, it must also be affirmed that the group's recognition and articulation of God's communal presence and activity in their midst was ultimately possible due to the small group's connection to the larger community of the church. Christ's unique presence in the church body as a whole is what enabled the small group's experience to truly be holy and sacred, as opposed to simply consisting of a general affinity one might encounter in a support group. This potential has always been present for them, but was highlighted by the project through such practices as communal listening and responding.

Scripture

Finally, scripture played a role in the theological significance of this project due not only to its usefulness for being utilized for instruction regarding righteous living, or even as a spiritual discipline that might ultimately result in equipping one for good works and Christlike character, but because of its unique nature described as "inspired" (God-breathed) in 2 Timothy 3:16. It was because of this that the researcher affirmed Willard's recognition of the special potential of scripture to reveal ultimate reality according to God's divine plan, purposes, and direction when one willingly submits him/herself to it.⁶ Inherent in this understanding of scripture's special status was a recognition that human engagement with it can yield varied results depending upon one's methods and assumptions. Taking a cue from Bonhoeffer, the researcher articulated a difference between reading with one's intellect and allowing scripture to penetrate one's heart, believing that the latter has a direct effect on one's whole person by which scripture's

⁶ Gary Black Jr., *The Theology of Dallas Willard: Discovering Protoevangelical Faith* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 64-65.

precepts become available to the reader in a tangible way, and open up the possibility of influencing outward behavior.⁷

Participants demonstrated not only an experience of what the project affirmed about scripture during the intervention, but a growing awareness that displayed an overall change in how they understood it to function theologically, most specifically in their lives as individuals, as well as in community. This was evidenced in most of the group's indicated increase in experiencing God speak to them through scripture on the post-test, as well as in nearly everyone's articulation of specific invitations they believed they received from God during the intervention. The researcher believes that this demonstrated theological reality will continue to be a part of the participants' engagement with scripture, and will perhaps grow due to their verbalized increase in the quantity in which they read the Bible.

Practical Significance

Perhaps the most basic and general practical implication of the project is simply that it makes a case for prioritizing spiritual formation in the life and ministries of the church. The researcher based his pre-intervention finding that participants showed little awareness of or engagement with being spiritually formed by the Holy Spirit on their indicated lack of reflecting Jesus' teaching and example on the pre-test, and their apparent failure to recognize that truly noticing and responding to God should have an impact on this. In addition, their descriptions of the way God influenced their actions were connected to their understandings of external obligations, duties, and behavior

⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Reflections on the Bible: Human Word and Word of God*, Manfred Weber, ed., M. Eugene Boring, trans. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 70-73.

placed upon them by authority figures, church participation, and/or through their recognitions and understandings of moral maxims. For the most part, this reflected a loyal, modern mindset, which emphasized institutional participation in regards to their perceived religious responsibility.⁸ Thus, one specific practical contribution that the project made for the participants involved was the act of engaging them in the activity of God in their lives apart from a programmatic framework that prioritized outward behavior disproportionately to individual character formation. In regards to Christian ministry in general, the researcher recognizes that not all share the participants' sense of religious responsibility, and that the project's demonstrated penchant for involving people in Christian spiritual formation might also prove valuable to those less inclined to look to external religious systems and structures for spiritual guidance.

In the course of engaging participants in spiritual formation, this project not only led them to utilize scripture in a way they had not done before and increased their personal reading of it, but also introduced them to a spiritual practice that resulted in the fusion of their beliefs and actions. On the pre-test and throughout the intervention, all participants articulated personal convictions affirming that one's beliefs and practices should be consistent with one another, yet admitted that this was often not the case for them. Their assertions mirrored what Amy Plantinga Pauw pointed out using the story of Jonah as an example: namely, that it is all too common for religious people to exhibit "gaps" between the beliefs they hold and the way they live them out.⁹ In the cases of the

⁸ John Drane, *Do Christians Know how to be Spiritual?: The Rise of New Spirituality and the Mission of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2005), 12-13.

⁹ Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Attending to Gaps between Beliefs and Practices" in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 37.

participants, these gaps were not due to a lack of being familiar with what the Bible says, studying it regularly, or having someone preach and/or apply it to them weekly; rather, the element that made the difference was being guided in engaging scripture in a way that recognized God's ability to speak uniquely through it, and tangibly connecting it to what he might want participants to be or do.¹⁰ This is significant for congregations whom are seeking to more authentically involve attendees in ministry. Rather than potentially wasting energy on guessing at ministry projects/emphases that may or may not be of interest to people, it could prove more useful to periodically document how God is speaking to the congregation at large through their regular attention to his presence and promptings while engaging in spiritual practices, and to use this as a guide in determining ministry efforts for a season. Of course, this presupposes a church-wide establishment of prioritizing spiritual formation through regular engagement with spiritual practices in some shape or form.

This brings the researcher to a final note regarding the practical implications of the project: a consideration of the purpose for which small groups exist at Eastwood Baptist Church. Participants in the intervention indicated initially valuing Christian community for its utilitarian ability of providing mutual encouragement and support to members in the face of everyday circumstances. This is in keeping with Robert Wuthnow's broad survey of small groups that recognizes the tendency for them to be a sort of "community within a community" that is keenly and sometimes singularly focused

¹⁰ Theresa F. Latini, *The Church and the Crisis of Community: A Practical Theology of Small Group Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 66-67.

on enhancing the lives of individual participants.¹¹ While the intervention proved through participants' journal responses that the concept of community expressed during the project was more akin to Theresa Latini's "well-developed" small groups that valued inward and external engagement and service,¹² the researcher recognizes that participants did not explicitly articulate an understanding of Christian community that expressed this. This implies a necessity for not only a change in what occurs within small groups at Eastwood, but also for an outward emphasis on those things which characterize Latini's "well developed" groups which are: 1) guided by mission statements; 2) supported through regular leadership training; and 3) embedded within the congregation's overall ministry design.¹³ In regards to ministry in general, congregational leaders would do well to consider their motivation(s) before starting/changing a model of small group ministry to include a spiritual formation emphasis. Without proper communication and education, it is possible that participants could miss the point of engaging in spiritual formation altogether.

Broader Significance

While the purpose of this project centered on spiritual formation in small groups, its importance extends beyond these parameters. For those more enmeshed in a post-Christian and post-modern mindset, even participation in a small group can be understood as affiliating with an institution they have no desire to be a part of. The basic method of group *lectio divina* might prove especially appealing to spiritual seekers of this

¹¹ Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 357-358.

¹² Latini, 57-60.

¹³ Latini, 47.

ilk described by Howard Rice as open to experiencing God in whatever way(s) might prove effective and satisfying, with little regard for classical doctrine, theology, or practice.¹⁴ One practitioner that is currently utilizing elements of *lectio divina* in such a way is Shaun Lambert, pastor of Stanmore Baptist Church on the outskirts of London. Lambert combines the secular concept of “mindfulness,” which he calls “our universal capacity for human awareness and attention,” with the theological convictions and spiritual disciplines of *lectio divina* through seminars in a local coffee shop which he calls “Mindful Church Café.” In this setting, people whom otherwise would not participate in scripture meditation do so in a way that sometimes serves as an “invitation” for them to explore Christianity and the Gospel more deeply.¹⁵

Additional broad significance can be recognized in the secondary findings of the project. As participants had their awareness of God heightened through engaging in *lectio divina*, their sense of empathy for one another and others increased. In a time in which the country of the researcher tends to be polarized politically and ideologically, Christians should be leading the way in modeling compassion and understanding for others, regardless of personal agreement in issues surrounding politics, religion, social policy, etc. Unfortunately, the researcher often observes the opposite happening among Christians. The experiences in this project might lead one to question how he/she should appropriately understand and interact with others (especially those with whom he/she disagrees), and how his/her engagement with them might be affected through continual and purposeful engagement with scripture in community. Taken together with the other

¹⁴ Howard Rice, *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998), 35.

¹⁵ Shaun Lambert, personal website, accessed Sept. 22, 2017, <https://shaunlambert.co.uk/>.

secondary findings that participating in the project led to (feelings of peace and a recognition of one's need to surrender to God), the ingredients for emphasizing renewed relationships and understanding anchored in God's desire and will for all people are potentially present.

As with all research, the findings in this project were limited by time constraints and demographics. The unique concern of the researcher for the small group ministry of his church led to the involvement of people that were interested and active in the church's small group ministry. This resulted in a variety of ages and experience in regards to engagement with spiritual formation. Six sessions seemed like just enough time to introduce most of the participants to the spiritual practices involved in the project and to allow them to become comfortable practicing them together and sharing about their experience. Were the researcher given more time or an opportunity to follow-up with the same participants, he would be inclined to measure the effect that a similar intervention would have on the participants' ability to actively engage in spiritual guidance with one another. He would be interested in considering how the group's increased awareness of God's presence and promptings would affect their ability to competently give and receive guidance to and with one another, based on their observation of the Holy Spirit at work in their midst. In addition, specific theological training on the role of Christian community (i.e. the church) in embodying the presence of God would at least help them articulate what they have and can continue to experience in community, and at most create a more realized expectation to encounter God in such a context.

Before the intervention, the researcher expressed a hope that the implications of the project would extend beyond one small group or even the small group ministry of his

church. Graham Standish details the cumulative work of many years of introducing the concepts and practices championed in the spiritual formation movement into the overall life of a specific congregation in *Becoming a Blessed Church*.¹⁶ Envisioning a project of this magnitude coming to fruition in the life of Eastwood indeed seems daunting; however, a starting point might be utilizing leaders within this project's small group to introduce other leaders in the congregation to some of the basic concepts and disciplines they experienced, with the long term goal of encouraging congregational leaders not only to train others under them, but to apply the formational activities of listening, meditating, responding, etc. to the overall processes involved in their area(s) of leadership.

Conclusion

This project sought to utilize the practice of *lectio divina* to engage small group participants in the process of spiritual formation. The research determined that doing so resulted in an increased awareness and response to God that shaped the way participants modeled the teachings and example of Jesus in their thoughts and actions, thus ultimately demonstrating evidence of changed character and being spiritually formed by the Holy Spirit. The researcher believes that these findings meet the need of addressing his perceived neglect of intentional formational practices within the small group ministry of Eastwood Baptist Church, and have the potential of being broadly shared and emphasized throughout the congregation as a whole. Were this potential to be met, it might result in a renewed sense of purpose for the church that trusts more in God's leadership and guidance through the Holy Spirit than its own ability, heritage, denomination, or inherited

¹⁶ N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Spiritual Purpose, Presence, and Power* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), 7.

polity. The researcher also affirms that the implications of the research can and should be considered in settings that might be considered more “post-Christian” or “post-modern” than the one in which the intervention took place. He is certain that when applied appropriately, Paul’s invitation to “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (Col 3:15) can impact even those outside of the church. The Holy Spirit is present and working everywhere, if only someone might promote proper awareness and attention for it to be discovered.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SESSION 1 MATERIALS

Elements of Spiritual Reading Handout – Session 1

I. Silence/Solitude

- A. Jesus prioritized solitude (cf. Matt 4:1-11; 14:23; 26:36-46; Mk 1:35; 6:31; Lk 5:15).
- B. Scripture commands the practice of silence and sometimes portrays God as speaking in the midst of it (Ps 46:10; 1 Kings 19:12).
- C. “Solitude is more a state of mind and heart than it is a place. There is a solitude of the heart that can be maintained at all times. Crowds, or the lack of them, have little to do with this inward attentiveness” (Foster, 96).
- D. Christian spiritual seekers have connected the desire for solitude with the desire to know God and the way he created us as our most authentic selves (Barton, 32-33).
- E. Inner solitude and silence are inseparable; however, it is by understanding and experiencing inner silence that we can know solitude (Barton, 32-33).
- F. Cultivating inner silence that leads to solitude requires learning to still (or ignore) outward stimuli and preoccupying thoughts and feelings. It is NOT expecting any a specific encounter with God; it is resting, waiting before God (Wilhoit and Howard, 110).

II. Meditation

- A. The Bible presents God, Scripture, and divine will/activity as being an appropriate objects of meditation or subjects on which to devote mental attention (Gen 24:36; Ps 1:2; 63:6; 119:148; Rom 12:2; Col 3:2).
- B. When the Bible mentions meditation, the stressed result is changed behavior resulting from an encounter with God (Foster, 15).
- C. “Meditation engages us at the level of the ‘heart’ in its biblical sense, where memory, experience, thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, intuitions, and intentions are joined. This is where we are likely to discover what a given passage means in our lives personally or as a community” (Thompson, 23).

- D. Christian meditation should not be confused with Eastern meditation; while the latter involves effort to empty the mind, the former involves effort to fill it (Foster, 20).
- E. Christian meditation does not necessarily lead to ecstasy; it is more common for it to result in guidance in dealing with ordinary, human problems (Foster, 22).

III. Listening

- A. Jesus commanded his disciples to actively listen as he taught them (Mk 4:9) and commended Mary for prioritizing this discipline over busyness (Lk 10:38-42).
- B. Job states that his greatest consolation would be for his friends to listen to him (Job 21:2).
- C. Listening is an act of submission (Foster, 122) that is owed to other believers and God alike; “to listen to others quiets and disciplines the mind to listen to God” (138).
- D. Listening is an act of service (hospitality) performed on behalf of others and God (Thompson, 137).
- E. The goal of listening is notice God’s Spirit at work in ourselves and the lives of others’ (Vest, 54).

IV. Responding

- A. Jesus revealed that God’s will for us is generally to respond in ways that give us life (Jn 10:10). Even before this, God commanded his people to choose life by obeying the law (Deut 30:19-20).
- B. Ignatious’ classifications of “consolation” and “desolation” can help in discerning whether or not a response is “life-giving” (Barton, 112).
- C. Responding to God is an act of service above all else inspired by his promptings and urgings (Foster, 128). To ensure our response is anchored in these, it is helpful to notice how our own feelings and thoughts measure against Scripture (Fryling, 56-57).
- D. Honesty is required in order to authentically respond to God or your sense of him in another (Vest, 45).

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*Guided Meditation - Session 1

Luke 19:1-10
Jesus and Zacchaeus

1. Sit comfortably and quietly for a minute or two. Breathe deeply. Try to let go of the anxieties of your day. Focus your attention on the Spirit of God living within you.
2. Now listen to the account of Jesus and Zacchaeus:
 [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possession, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."
3. Spend a few minutes reflecting on how you might have experienced a similar encounter with Jesus. In your imagination picture a place you go to often (your home, your office, your neighborhood, any spot that you frequent). Imagine yourself looking in on whatever is happening there, as Zacchaeus looked down from the tree in Jericho. ++++ What do you see in your picture? What are they doing or talking about? ++++ Picture Jesus entering the scene. What does Jesus do or say? ++++ Now gently enter the room or place you're picturing in your imagination. How do you feel about being there? ++++ Is there anything you want to ask Jesus about what's going on? ++++ What does Jesus say to you? ++++ How do the people around you respond to your conversation with Jesus? Do they grumble about it as Zacchaeus's friends? Did or do they encourage you? ++++ If Jesus said he wanted to engage in your life today (as he did with Zacchaeus), how might you expect to encounter him?

* The above meditation is printed as featured on page 140 in the following source:
 Fryling, Ruth Haley. *Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2009.

Guided Journaling – Session 1

Assigned Participant ID: _____

1. Describe your experience and awareness of God during the silent moments of the guided meditation.

2. Describe your experience and/or understanding of the Scripture as you listened to it being read.

3. What effect did the guided mediation questions have on your understanding of God's involvement in your life?

4. What effect did the overall experience have on what you feel God wants you to be or do in the present and immediate future?

APPENDIX B

SESSION 2 MATERIALS

Practicalities of Spiritual Reading Handout - Session 2

Introductory Video Clip (Barton, Session 2 - Learn about It, 2:00-7:30)

I. History

- A. What we are calling “spiritual reading” can be traced back to Benedict of Nursia (480-547). In *The Rule of St. Benedict*, he emphasizes a prayerful focus on Scripture that incorporated reading, hearing, meditating, and applying Scripture as an inseparable whole (Wilhoit and Howard, 17).
- B. While using different terminology, reformers throughout Christian history such as Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have emphasized a similar framework (Vest, 107-108).
- C. From a biblical perspective, it follows in the tradition of Moses that claims that the internalization of the Law produces obedience (Deut 30:14).

II. Purpose

- A. In spiritual reading, the purpose is not informational, but transformational. As a necessary prerequisite, Thomas Merton refers to informational reading as the “front porch” of spiritual reading (Thompson, 21).
- B. In the spirit of Heb 4:12-13, spiritual reading is practiced with the assumption that God speaks personal words to people through his divinely inspired Word (Vest, 11).
- C. Spiritual reading seeks to deeply experience the truth of a small amount of Scripture through right-brained activity utilizing repetition and imagination. Rather than relying on linear logic, it emphasizes circular examination so that “it not only enlightens the mind, it also massages the will” (Fryling, 67-68).
- D. Cognitive reading VS spiritual reading - Cognitive reading asks: *What does it say? What does it mean? How do I apply it to my life?* Spiritual reading asks: *How do I feel about what is being said? Why do I feel this way? What do my reactions tell me about myself.*

III. Format

- A. Formats for practicing spiritual reading vary and can be amended for individual/group usage and time constraints. The following will be our working format:

Prepare

Take a moment to come fully into the present. Sit comfortable alert, close eyes, and center yourself with breathing as a reminder of the sustaining life God has breathed into you.

1. Hear the word (that is addressed to you).

First reading (twice). Listen for the word or phrase from the passage that attracts you. Repeat it over softly to yourself during a one-minute silence. When the leader gives the signal, say aloud only that word or phrase (without elaboration).

2. Ask, “How is my life touched?”

Second-stage reading. Listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. Consider the possibilities or receive a sensory impression during the two minutes of silence. When the leader gives signal, speak a sentence or two perhaps beginning with the words *I hear, I see, I sense*. (Or you may pass.)

3. Ask, “Is there an invitation here?” (for you).

Third-stage reading. Listen to discover a possible invitation relevant to the next few days. Ponder it during several minutes of silence. When leader gives signal, speak of your sense of invitation. (Or you may pass.)

4. Pray (for one another’s empowerment to respond).

Pray, aloud or silently, for God to help the person on your right respond to the invitation received.

If desired, group members may share their feelings about the process after completing these steps (Vest, 27).

IV. Scripture Selection

- A. Given the inspired nature of Scripture, any text could theoretically be used for spiritual reading; however, texts containing strong action verbs, concrete images, narrative, and poetry are likely more accessible. As a general rule, material in the Gospels or Psalms are great for stating out (Vest, 69-70).
- B. The length of text may range from one to ten verses, granting enough flexibility to focus on a specific word or phrase, without flooding the mind with distractive details (Vest, 70).

V. Spiritual Reading in Community

- A. Sharing in and expressing intimacy with God as a community is at the heart of the Christian faith (Eph 5:19, 21; Col 3:16; 1 Thess 5:11).
- B. Doing this allows us to become more fully who we are in Christ (Vest, 13).

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*Abbreviated Spiritual Reading Experience - Session 2

Unhurried Grace - Isaiah 30:15-21

Introduction: God had warned Judah not to turn to Egypt and other nations for military help, but to trust him and wait quietly. They became impatient and rejected God, relying on human cleverness and power instead, which caused big problems for them. Like Judah we miss out on God's grace when we don't wait on God, but hurry to act by human power.

Prepare: Take a moment to come fully into the present. Sit comfortably alert, close eyes, and center yourself with breathing.

Read Scripture: Isaiah 30:15-21 (NIV84) ¹⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it. ¹⁶ You said, 'No, we will flee on horses.' Therefore you will flee! You said, 'We will ride off on swift horses.' Therefore your pursuers will be swift! ¹⁷ A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away, till you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a banner on a hill." ¹⁸ Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! ¹⁹ O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. ²⁰ Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. ²¹ Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."

1st Reading: Listen for the word or phrase from the passage that attracts you. Meditate on that (2 minutes).

2nd Reading: Listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. How does it make you feel? What thoughts or images does it invoke? Consider how you would describe it in words beginning with "*I hear, I see, or I sense*" (2 minutes).

3rd Reading: Listen to discover a possible invitation relevant to the next few days (2 minutes). Offer a response to God silently (1 minute).

If desired and time permitting, group members may share their feelings about the process after completing these steps.

*The above experience is taken from two combined sources:

Gaultirie, Bill. "Unhurried Grace (Isaiah 30:15-21)." Accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.soulshpherd.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Unhurried-Grace.pdf>.

Vest, Norvene. *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups*. Nashville: Upper Room, 1996.

Guided Journaling – Session 2

Assigned Participant ID: _____

1. Describe your experience and awareness of God during the silent moments of the group spiritual reading.

2. Describe your experience and/or understanding of the Scripture as you listened to it being read.

3. What effect did the spiritual reading questions have on your understanding of God's involvement in your life?

4. What effect did the overall experience have on what you feel God wants you to be or do in the present and immediate future?

APPENDIX C

SESSION 3 MATERIALS

*Group Spiritual Reading Experience – Session 3

Jesus Sees Your Pain and Heals Your Heart - Luke 13:10-17

Introduction: The religious leaders have been wanting to kill Jesus because he keeps breaking their laws and Sabbath rules. In chapters 12-13 he warns those following and listening to him of the hypocrisy inherent in their legalism, and urges faithfulness to God even when it potentially results in persecution and misunderstanding by these strict rule-keepers. Rather than worrying about this and the minor details of life, Jesus urges his listeners to “bear fruit” for God through several images and metaphors. He then demonstrates what this looks like in the following passage.

Prepare: Take a moment to come fully into the present. Sit comfortable alert, close eyes, and center yourself with breathing as a reminder of the sustaining life God has breathed into you.

Read Scripture: Luke 13: 10-17 (NIV) ¹⁰ On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹ and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” ¹³ Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. ¹⁴ Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” ¹⁵ The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶ Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

1. Hear the word (that is addressed to you).

First reading (twice). Listen for the word or phrase from the passage that attracts you. Repeat it over softly to yourself during a one-minute silence. When the leader gives the signal, say aloud only that word or phrase (without elaboration).

2. Ask, “How is my life touched?”

Second-stage reading. Listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. Consider the possibilities or receive a sensory impression during the two minutes of silence. When the leader gives signal, speak a sentence or two perhaps beginning with the words I hear, I see, I sense. (Or you may pass.)

3. Ask, “Is there an invitation here?” (for you).

Third-stage reading. Listen to discover a possible invitation relevant to the next few days. Ponder it during several minutes of silence. When leader gives signal, speak of your sense of invitation. (Or you may pass.)

4. Pray (for one another's empowerment to respond).

Pray, aloud or silently, for God to help the person on your right respond to the invitation received.

If desired, group members may share their feelings about the process after completing these steps.

*The above experience is taken from two combined sources:

Gaultirie, Bill. "Unhurried Grace (Isaiah 30:15-21)." Accessed March 1, 2017,
<http://www.soulshepherding.org/wp-content/uploads/Jesus-Sees-Your-Pain-and-Heals-Your-Heart.pdf>.

Vest, Norvene. *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups*. Nashville: Upper Room, 1996.

Guided Journaling – Session 3

Assigned Participant ID: _____

1. Describe your experience and awareness of God during the silent moments of the group spiritual reading.

2. Describe your experience and/or understanding of the Scripture as you listened to it being read.

3. What effect did the spiritual reading questions and group responses have on your understanding of God's involvement in your life and the lives of others?

4. What effect did the overall experience have on what you feel God wants you to be or do in the present and immediate future?

APPENDIX D

SESSION 4 MATERIALS

*Group Spiritual Reading Experience– Session 4

A Thorn in the Flesh as a Means of Grace – 2 Corinthians 12:7-12

Introduction: Many in Corinth didn't appreciate Paul's extensive ministry to them. They criticized him as a boring speaker. They said he was not a "Super Apostle" like Apollos and others who were flashy, eloquent, and entertaining. So in 2 Corinthians Paul corrected their thinking by pointing out that true greatness is seen when God's grace is manifested through our weaknesses and sufferings. He uses himself as an example, which included boasting in his "thorn in the flesh."

What is Paul's thorn in the flesh? There are many theories. The context suggests that it was the criticism he continually experienced, not just from the Corinthians but from many groups and people he ministered to. Maybe God wants to leave us guessing so that we would focus on our own personal thorn as a means of God's grace to us.

Prepare: Take a moment to come fully into the present. Sit comfortable alert, close eyes, and center yourself with breathing as a reminder of the sustaining life God has breathed into you.

Read Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:7-12 (ESV) ⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. ¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

1. Hear the word (that is addressed to you).

First reading (twice). Listen for the word or phrase from the passage that attracts you. Repeat it over softly to yourself during a one-minute silence. When the leader gives the signal, say aloud only that word or phrase (without elaboration).

2. Ask, "How is my life touched?"

Second-stage reading. Listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. Consider the possibilities or receive a sensory impression during the two minutes of silence. When the leader gives signal, speak a sentence or two perhaps beginning with the words I hear, I see, I sense. (Or you may pass.)

3. Ask, “Is there an invitation here?” (for you).

Third-stage reading. Listen to discover a possible invitation relevant to the next few days. Ponder it during several minutes of silence. When leader gives signal, speak of your sense of invitation. (Or you may pass.)

4. Pray (for one another’s empowerment to respond).

Pray, aloud or silently, for God to help the person on your right respond to the invitation received.

If desired, group members may share their feelings about the process after completing these steps.

*The above experience is taken from two combined sources:

Gaultirie, Bill. “Unhurried Grace (Isaiah 30:15-21).” Accessed March 1, 2017,
<http://www.soulshepherding.org/wp-content/uploads/Jesus-Sees-Your-Pain-and-Heals-Your-Heart.pdf>.

Vest, Norvene. *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups*. Nashville: Upper Room, 1996.

Guided Journaling – Session 4

Assigned Participant ID: _____

1. Describe your experience and awareness of God during the silent moments of the group spiritual reading.

2. Describe your experience and/or understanding of the Scripture as you listened to it being read.

3. What effect did the spiritual reading questions and group responses have on your understanding of God's involvement in your life and the lives of others?

4. What effect did the overall experience have on what you feel God wants you to be or do in the present and immediate future?

APPENDIX E

SESSION 5 MATERIALS

*Group Spiritual Reading Experience– Session 5

Questions and Songs in the Dark Night – Psalm 13

Introduction: Psalm 13 is a psalm for times of trial, especially the Dark Night of the Soul when God feels absent. David wrote this during a time of great distress, perhaps when he was hiding out in the desert being hunted by King Saul, who he had faithfully ministered to and served all his life. David is experiencing injustice, anxiety, sadness, danger, and unanswered prayer and still he trusts God and rejoices in his goodness. He brings himself and his circumstances in the spiritual reality where the LORD is his refuge.

Prepare: Take a moment to come fully into the present. Sit comfortable alert, close eyes, and center yourself with breathing as a reminder of the sustaining life God has breathed into you.

Read Scripture: Psalm 13 (NIV84)

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;
my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,
for he has been good to me.

1. Hear the word (that is addressed to you).

First reading (twice). Listen for the word or phrase from the passage that attracts you. Repeat it over softly to yourself during a one-minute silence. When the leader gives the signal, say aloud only that word or phrase (without elaboration).

2. Ask, “How is my life touched?”

Second-stage reading. Listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. Consider the possibilities or receive a sensory impression during the two minutes of silence. When the leader gives signal, speak a sentence or two perhaps beginning with the words I hear, I see, I sense. (Or you may pass.)

3. Ask, “Is there an invitation here?” (for you).

Third-stage reading. Listen to discover a possible invitation relevant to the next few days. Ponder it during several minutes of silence. When leader gives signal, speak of your sense of invitation. (Or you may pass.)

4. Pray (for one another's empowerment to respond).

Pray, aloud or silently, for God to help the person on your right respond to the invitation received.

If desired, group members may share their feelings about the process after completing these steps.

*The above experience is taken from two combined sources:

Gaultirie, Bill. "Unhurried Grace (Isaiah 30:15-21)." Accessed March 1, 2017,
<http://www.soulshpherd.org/wp-content/uploads/Jesus-Sees-Your-Pain-and-Heals-Your-Heart.pdf>.

Vest, Norvene. *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups*. Nashville: Upper Room, 1996.

Guided Journaling – Session 5

Assigned Participant ID: _____

1. Describe your experience and awareness of God during the silent moments of the group spiritual reading.
2. Describe your experience and/or understanding of the Scripture as you listened to it being read.
3. What effect did the spiritual reading questions and group responses have on your understanding of God's involvement in your life and the lives of others?
4. What effect did the overall experience have on what you feel God wants you to be or do in the present and immediate future?

APPENDIX F

SESSION 6 MATERIALS

*Group Spiritual Guidance Experience – Session 6

Prepare: Take a moment to come fully into the present. Sit comfortable alert, close eyes, and center yourself with breathing as a reminder of the sustaining life God has breathed into you.

Breath Prayer: Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts (Ps 139:23).

1. Hear the word.

Review recent life events and select a single incident for reflection.

- In several minutes of silence, review the hours and experiences of the last several days.
- When prompted, state simply the approximate time of day when the chosen incident occurred.

2. How is my life touched?

Review the incident mentally and emotionally as it happened, then be receptive to a phrase or image that seems to be given in relation to it.

- Remember that “touched” refers to the touch of Christ.
- For a couple of minutes of silence, recreate the incident as it actually happened, remembering all you can about sights, sounds, feelings, etc.
- For the next couple of minutes, recreate the emotions of the incident: Where was the strongest energy or any major energy shift?
- After this, set aside all mental musings and allow your mind to become receptive to a phrase or image from Scripture or literature.
- Be aware that the given phrase or image is a blessing, a sign of Christ’s presence in the incident. When prompted, share only the phrase or image.

3. Is there an invitation here?

Offer the incident and your reflections back to God. Rest and be responsive to any invitation that might come.

- Bring back to memory your life incident and hold it alongside your image or phrase in your mind for about a minute.
- Offer all of this up to God and let it go for now.
- Be receptive to any invitation or encouragement that may come now to be or do something in the next few days. Share when you are prompted.

4. Pray for the person to the right.

Afterward, the group members may share their thoughts and feelings about the process, if desired.

*The above experience is taken from two combined sources:

Gaultirie, Bill. "Unhurried Grace (Isaiah 30:15-21)." Accessed March 1, 2017,
<http://www.soulshepherding.org/wp-content/uploads/Jesus-Sees-Your-Pain-and-Heals-Your-Heart.pdf>.

Vest, Norvene. *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups*. Nashville: Upper Room, 1996.

Guided Journaling – Session 6

Assigned Participant ID: _____

1. Describe your experience and awareness of God as you prayed Psalm 139:23 in silence.

2. Describe your experience and/or understanding of the life event as you reflected and meditated upon it.

3. What effect did the group responses have on your understanding of God's involvement in the lives of others?

4. What effect did the overall experience have on what you feel God wants you to be or do in the present and immediate future?

APPENDIX G

PRE-TEST/POST-TEST

Assigned Participant ID: _____

Date: _____

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Please respond to the following statements:

I experience God's presence and guidance in my life.	Always	Usually	Half the time	Seldom	Never
I respond to what I think God wants me to do.	Always	Usually	Half the time	Seldom	Never
I recognize and respond to God's involvement in life events.	Always	Usually	Half the time	Seldom	Never
I recognize and response to God's involvement in the lives of others.	Always	Usually	Half the time	Seldom	Never
My prayers are meaningful.	Always	Usually	Half the time	Seldom	Never
God speaks to me through the Bible.	Always	Usually	Half the time	Seldom	Never
My thoughts and actions reflect Jesus' teaching and example.	Always	Usually	Half the time	Seldom	Never

Please respond to the following questions in detail:

- 1. How often do you pray? What thoughts/feelings/experiences accompany it? What factors most influence this?**

- 2. How often do you read the Bible? What thoughts/feelings/experiences accompany it? What factors most influence this?**
- 3. Describe the role of other Christians (community) on the way you relate and respond to God.**
- 4. To what degree does God influence your thoughts and actions? What do you attribute this to?**

APPENDIX H

LETTER OF APPROVAL FROM CHURCH



Eastwood Baptist Church

2518 E. Main • Gatesville, Texas 76528 • (254) 865-2948

June 16, 2017

To whom it may concern:

On Wednesday, April 12, 2017, Eastwood Baptist Church voted in a regularly scheduled business meeting to grant permission and support to the pastor, Matthew Richard, to involve church members and part of Eastwood's ministry setting in his research project: *Introducing Small Groups to the Concept and Process of Spiritual Formation by Utilizing the Practice of Lectio Divina as a Model*, which will partially fulfill the requirements for his Doctorate of Ministry degree George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, you may contact our office secretary at (254) 865-2948.

Respectfully,

Shannon Jones

Shannon Jones
Church Secretary

APPENDIX I

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Baylor University
George W. Truett Theological Seminary

Consent Form for Research

**PROTOCOL TITLE: Introducing Small Groups to the Concept and Process of
Spiritual Formation by Utilizing the Practice of Lectio Divina as a
Model**

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Matthew Richard

SUPPORTED BY: Baylor University

Introduction

Please read this form carefully. The purpose of this form is to provide you with important information about taking part in a research study. If any of the statements or words in this form are unclear, please let us know. We would be happy to answer any questions. You have the right to discuss this study with another person who is not part of the research team before making your decision whether or not to be in the study.

Taking part in this research study is up to you. If you decide to take part in this research study we will ask you to sign this form. We will give you a copy of the signed form.

The person in charge of this study is Matthew Richard and his faculty advisor is Dr. Angela Reed. We will refer to this person as the “researcher” throughout this form.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to determine the effect that exposing small group members to *lectio divina* has on the facilitation of Christian spiritual formation.

We are asking you to take part in this study because you are a member of a small group at Eastwood Baptist Church.

About eight subjects will take part in this research study at Baylor University.

How long will I take part in this research study?

I expect that you will be in this research study for six sessions occurring over six weeks.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

The intervention will provide participants with exposure to specific spiritual disciplines that Christians have historically practiced to increase awareness and response to God, and will facilitate communal engagement with them over the course of six small group meetings. Throughout the process, assessment will be made via guided journaling and pre-test/post-test intervention questionnaires administered using pencil and paper.

The first two sessions will largely be informational in nature and will introduce participants to the individual elements and practicalities of *lectio divina* (the researcher’s preferred term, “spiritual reading,” will be utilized throughout the intervention). In session one, participants will receive verbal and video instruction based on a handout that

will familiarize them with the elements of silence/solitude, meditation, listening, and responding as Christian spiritual disciplines. Toward the end of the session, participants will be guided in a brief meditation that combines these individual elements in practice. The session will be concluded with guided journaling about their experience. The second session will include verbal instruction based on a handout detailing the practicalities of engaging in the previously introduced spiritual disciplines within the practice of spiritual reading. Toward the end of the session, participants will be guided in a brief spiritual reading that demonstrates the practical points made in the instruction, which will be followed by guided journaling about the experience.

Sessions three through five will be largely experiential, but based on the instructions from the first two sessions. In each session, a passage of scripture will be introduced, followed by a time of preparation for and engagement in spiritual reading based on the specific passage. Brief moments will be allowed for participants to audibly respond with words, phrases, and invitations they may have received from God. Following the spiritual reading, participants will engage in guided journaling about the experience.

Session six will follow a similar format as the previous three; however, rather than utilizing a passage of scripture in the process of spiritual reading, it will promote engagement with life events through group spiritual guidance. The same goals of recognizing God's presence and promptings will stand, but with the added emphasis of experiencing it through life events within community. Following a time of preparation and prayer, participants will be guided in identifying and reviewing a recent life event they feel drawn to by God. Brief moments will be allowed for participants to audibly respond with words, phrases, and invitations they may have received. Following the spiritual guidance, participants will engage in guided journaling about the experience.

What are the risks of taking part in this research study?

To the best of our knowledge, taking part in this study will not hurt you.

Questionnaire/Survey Risks

You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics we will ask about. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

Loss of Confidentiality

A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality. Loss of confidentiality includes having your personal information shared with someone who is not on the study team and was not supposed to see or know about your information. The researcher plans to protect your confidentiality. Their plans for keeping your information private are described later in this consent form.

Are there any benefits from being in this research study?

There are no benefits to you from taking part in this research.

What alternatives are available?

You may choose not to take part in this research study.

Storing Study Information for Future Use

I would like to store your study information for future research related to the topic (e.g. the effect of exposure to *lectio divina* on spiritual formation). I will label all your study information with a code instead of your name. The key to the code connects your name to your study information. I will keep the code in a password-protected computer/locked file for three years, after which time the data will be destroyed.

How Will You Keep My Study Records Confidential?

We will keep the records of this study confidential by storing them under lock and key. We will make every effort to keep your records confidential. However, there are times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of your records.

The following people or groups may review your study records for purposes such as quality control or safety:

- The Researcher and any member of his research team
- Authorized members of Baylor University who may need to see your information, such as administrative staff members from the Office of the Vice Provost for Research and members of the Institutional Review Board (a committee which is responsible for the ethical oversight of the study)
- The sponsor or funding agency for this study
- Federal and state agencies that oversee or review research.

The study data will be stored in Texas.

The results of this study may also be used for teaching, publications, or presentations at professional meetings. If your individual results are discussed, your identity will be protected by using a code number or pseudonym rather than your name or other identifying information.

Study Participation and Early Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to withdraw at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. You cannot withdraw information collected prior to your withdrawal.

Will I get paid for taking part in this research study?

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

What will it cost me to take part in this research study?

There are no costs to you for taking part in this research study.

What if I have any questions or concerns about this research study?

You can call us with any concerns or questions about the research. Our telephone numbers are listed below:

Matthew Richard Dr. Angela Reed
214-726-2973 254-710-6254

If you want to speak with someone **not** directly involved in this research study, you may contact the Baylor University IRB through the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at 254-710-1438. You can talk to them about:

- Your rights as a research subject
- Your concerns about the research
- A complaint about the research

Signature of Subject:

I have read the information in this consent form including risks and possible benefits. I have been given the chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in the study.

Signature of Subject

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:

I have explained the research to the subject and answered all his/her questions. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the subject.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

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