

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

DEVELOPING A DISCIPLESHIP CULTURE IN THE CHURCH
THROUGH INCREASED “WITH-GOD” CONVERSATIONS

A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE
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ABSTRACT

The health and impact of the Church depends on the formation of followers of Jesus who engage life well with God and others. Current discipleship literature and studies of the American Church reveal a decline in church attendance and a lack of knowledge and life application of the gospel. The conversations that do and do not occur in any church tell a more accurate, revealing story of church health than church reports.

A desire for relationship, and hence, conversation, lies at the center of God's interactions with humanity. Rather than disengagement, God personally challenges, probes, dialogues, and asks questions of men and women to which He already knows the answer. By walking with God into conversations, Christians can similarly see common verbal exchanges become transformative spaces where they and others can grow in discovering the gospel and experiencing life with God.

This project examines (1) dialogue in the Scriptures, (2) current church examples of discipleship through conversations with a special emphasis and case study presented on CityVine Church in New York City, and (3) conversational skills found in the field of coaching to present a way for churches to move away from program-based discipleship toward a discipleship culture of greater formational impact where every Christian receives and gives discipleship. The research undertaken and applied through the field project enabled a transformational shift at CityVine Church from program-based to an emerging organic discipleship through conversations that holds import for any church.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statistics and experience indicate that despite filling seats in sanctuaries and increasing connect group attendance, the church in America faces an alarming state of emergency. Church attendance has declined from 43 percent to 36 percent from 2004 to 2014, and nearly one-third of Millennials who grew up in church have dropped out at differing points in their attendance.¹ Regular church attendance does not mean spiritual growth is taking place. Surveyed attendees, who today consider once every four to six weeks as regular attendance, carry skewed, personalized theological beliefs that run contrary to the gospel.² Personal conversations with countless local church attendees during the past ten years have shown that despite regular church attendance and serving in various ministries, distressingly little growth actually occurred in congregants' beliefs, understanding of the gospel, and life application. They may attend church but suffer an overall lack of passion and enthusiasm regarding Christianity. The Church desperately needs revitalization, and this holds true for both large and small churches, including CityVine Church in New York City. This project will address spiritual growth at

¹ Barna Group, "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church," Barna Update, last modified March 25, 2014, accessed September 6, 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/661-americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church#.VAt9nWPCedw>; Barna Group, "David Kinnaman and Jon Tyson Discuss Millennials, 'Nones' and a Renewed Vision for Church," Barna Update, last modified April 2014, accessed September 6, 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/662-david-kinnaman-and-jon-tyson-q-a#.VAtxx2PCedw>.

² Barna Group, "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church," Clarified further in Chapter 3.

CityVine Church, recognize the actual state of the church revealed through conversations, and establish healthier practices that foster authentic, growing followers of Jesus.

The Context

As one of four core leadership team members at CityVine Church, a small church plant in the Lower East Side of New York City, I interact with mostly young professionals in their twenties to late thirties in various stages of faith, from those exploring Christianity to mature followers of Christ. This bright group of individuals, most of whom moved to New York City from other states during or after college, is quite open to spiritual conversations and enjoys cognitive dialogues. As of spring 2013, I also began working full-time at a non-profit in the borough of Queens; this role provides opportunity to converse with Christians and non-Christians outside my own church context on a daily basis.

CityVine serves as one church plant among many other new and existing churches in a city with a population at an all-time high of 8.4 million inhabitants according to the latest Census reports.³ Living here means daily experiencing packed subways carrying 5.5 million passengers during weekdays and 5.8 million on weekends.⁴ This city bustles with ongoing conversation, neighbors residing in small spaces in close proximity to others in countless high rises, numerous people encountering one another as they go to and from work with events happening across the city and around the clock. Despite

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Current Estimates of New York City’s Population for July 2013,” under “Population, Current Population Estimates,” accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/census/popcur.shtml>.

⁴ Metropolitan Transportation Authority, “Subway and Bus Ridership, 2007-2013,” accessed September 6, 2014, <http://web.mta.info/nyct/facts/ridership/index.htm>.

constant interaction with others, New York City's residents experience high levels of isolation like the rest of America. The Barna Group finds that compared to one in ten people ten years ago, today one in five Americans self-identify as lonely.⁵ Meetup.com, a website created in 2002 in SoHo, New York City to help people connect, has since expanded to over 190 countries and 125,000 groups. The two reasons for its creation originated in Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*, about the collapse of community in America, and the change in New York after September 11, 2001, when people started to greet one another. "There was a yearning for community," Mr. Matt Meeker, founder of Meetup.com said.⁶ Conversations with newcomers encountered at CityVine reveal this same hunger for community and connection.

Joining the churchplant team at CityVine Church coincided with my time as a student of coaching at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (AGTS), where I have seen the difference in caliber of coaching conversations as compared to less intentional conversations. Coaching meets people where they are, asking powerful questions that move them forward. It creates discovery, awareness, and generates momentum. Some people naturally listen well; others do not. Coaching techniques provide a framework that any person can use to hone their listening abilities in order to better serve others during a conversation. The experiences of being coached and coaching others have provided a deeper realization of how the art of listening and asking questions can shift conversations toward God.

⁵ Barna Group, "How the Last Decade Changed American Life," Barna Update, last modified July 31, 2013, accessed September 6, 2014, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/624-how-the-last-decade-changed-american-life#.VAt_X2PCedx.

⁶ Adrienne Jeffries, "The Long and Curious History of Meetup.com," *New York Observer*, January 21, 2011, accessed May 6, 2014, <http://observer.com/2011/01/the-long-and-curious-history-of-meetupcom/>.

Many churches resonate with conversation. My conversations with the church vary from casual hallway conversations with the morning setup team to deeper one-on-one encounters with various individuals. Every church also shares the God-given commandment to make disciples. Conversations with church members have shown that dialogues have powerful potential for fulfilling the Great Commission. Spoken personal interactions with individuals reveal the place of people's faith journey better than their attendance at a program. Discipleship as a relational journey filled with conversations can be seen throughout the New Testament. Jesus taught His disciples and others through conversation. The Early Church gathered in homes—worshipping, eating, and talking together about God. Paul exchanged many letters with other believers. Today, as before, conversation provides important teaching space to relay experience and information and process truth, but unfortunately, many churches earmark discipleship for special programs rather than ordinary conversation.

At the same time, churches where conversations connect people to God do exist such as Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, England,⁷ and Trinity Christian Centre in Singapore. This poses a question as to why some churches talk frequently about God in everyday life while others have difficulty. Perhaps part of the answer for increasing conversations about God and making disciples lies in sermons that easily transition to

⁷ Christianity Today, "Charles Simeon: Evangelical Mentor and Model," Christian History, last modified August 8, 2008, accessed October 20, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/pastorsandpreachers/simeon.html>. The presence of conversations about God at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, England today may reflect the impact of Charles Simon, vicar for fifty-three years from 1783 to his death in 1836. Simon did what was unthinkable at the time, holding evening services and opening up his home to students on Friday and Sunday evening for "conversation parties" to teach them how to preach. By the time he died, it is estimated that one-third of all the Anglican ministers in the country had sat under his teaching at one time or another.

ordinary conversation and in intentional efforts by the church to personally and deeply engage individuals.

Interestingly, even as technology provides less need to meet in person or face to face, the desire to connect characterizes this generation. People reach out to friends and strangers via Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Gchat, Google Hangout, Skype, and a host of other digital means. Thousands of individuals willingly search for their future spouse through the Internet and chat with and meet strangers to form relationships over common themes. New York City alone has nearly 2,500 Meetup groups. As the Church shows up in these expanded meeting points, the number of conversations in which believers engage has grown exponentially. Each conversation involving a believer provides an opportunity to draw one another a step closer to Jesus. In today's digitally connected generation, the Church faces a significant opportunity to be present in more places than ever, expanding the Kingdom presence through meaningful conversations. To do this, believers need equipping to connect conversations to God within the Church itself.

The Opportunity

Conversations provide creative space for believers to share ideas, question, learn, broaden their understanding, and deepen their faith – both for personal growth and for the sake of another's growth. Such exchanges shape us as people. It was in conversation that Jesus created relationship, caused people to evaluate their beliefs, shared important revelations about the kingdom of God, and drew people closer to Him. The Early Church shared content in gatherings that strengthened believers' prayers, encouraged them to weather persecution, and defined what it meant to live out their faith in the world. Through conversational letters, the New Testament articulates a deep theology. These

conversations yielded amazing outcomes: people confessed as sinners, declared Jesus as the Son of God, gave up everything to follow Jesus, and threw away their old ways. The conversations seen in the Bible signify the potential of dialogues to enable spiritual change.

The many conversations I have had or overheard from others in church throughout the years have left me with a puzzling, disturbing observation. I have seen people experience transformation, share stories of encounters with God, bring friends to church, step up to serve on ministry teams, and go on missions trips. Despite these signs of spiritual activity, the tone and content of many conversations continue largely unchanged. Spiritual conversations remain rare, feel awkward, and seem difficult to initiate. Teams may spend a year serving and talking together without knowing where other team members are spiritually. Hallway conversations after a worship service may often touch only the surface of people's lives. Considering the overall amount of time believers spend in conversation within church, it is painful to see so many opportunities for growth in Christ bypassed. Too often the body of Christ relegates discipleship to the pastor, leaders, and programs rather than nourishing it as a part of every believer's life and conversations. In order to grow effectively, the church needs to learn to intentionally partner with God in conversations about Him without fear or awkwardness.

The coaching-approach provides a directly applicable framework and resource for deepening conversations in the local church. This approach involves asking open-ended questions rather than providing answers, easily transitioning conversations to a deeper level. Coaching teaches how to truly be with people by listening deeply and asking questions that come from an interest in what has just been said verbally or nonverbally.

Furthermore, rather than being a one-size-fits-all program, the coaching-approach to discipleship provides “an exquisitely tailored spiritual journey for each person.”⁸ In the past, the church has largely focused on developing disciples en masse. The coaching-approach meets individuals where they are and provides the Church with a wonderful way to equip more believers who can engage in deeper conversations, build meaningful relationships, and multiply opportunities to grow and grow others in faith.

The Purpose

This project will provide a way to use the coaching-approach as a tool to help CityVine Church shift into a conversational culture of meaningful disciple-making dialogue. Through the application of this approach, the church will gain a fresh understanding of discipleship, an effective way to grow personally and with others in living life with God, and transform dialogue into intentional windows for discipleship.

Definition of Terms

*Coaching-Approach*⁹—using coaching as the means of approaching dialogue; the International Coach Federation (ICF) defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their professional potential.”¹⁰ The coaching-approach utilizes the techniques of engaged listening, presence, and powerful questioning to naturally transition conversation to a deeper level

⁸ Chad Hall et al., *Faith Coaching: A Conversational Approach to Helping Others Move Forward in Faith* (Hickory, NC: Coach Approach Ministries, 2009), 29.

⁹ “Coach Approach Ministries” [CAM] of Hickory, SC, has coined the expression “coach-approach.” My training in the AGTS Coaching Cohort included classes from CAM leaders; but my use of the term in this project transcends my instruction from CAM.

¹⁰ International Coach Federation, “Overview & FAQ,” International Coach Federation, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://www.coachfederation.org/about-icf/overview/>.

without necessarily always incorporating the design of action steps that professional coaching does.

Connecting—a term introduced by Larry Crabb in his book *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships* to refer to the possibility of every believer connecting with others on a profoundly intimate level that can “powerfully heal broken hearts, overcome the damage done by abusive backgrounds, encourage the depressed to courageously move forward, stimulate the lonely to reach out, revitalize discouraged teens and children with new and holy energy, and introduce hope into the lives of the countless people who feel rejected, alone, and useless.”¹¹ A way of being with others in such a way, possible only through the presence of the Holy Spirit, that sees people with the delight of God and responds through deep listening and response.

Conversation—the interaction of questions and response between two people; conversations via texting, Facebook, or phone are included as long as dialogue happens in both directions.

Engel Scale—a numerical model of measurement, from -8 to +5, developed by James F. Engel as a way of charting the journey from no belief in God to spiritual maturity as a Christian.

Fight Club—created by Jonathan Dodson, author of *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* and pastor of Austin City Life church in Texas, to provide discipleship through weekly gatherings of “small, simple groups of two or three men or women who meet regularly to help one another beat up the flesh and believe the gospel of grace. Men

¹¹ Larry Crabb, *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1997), xiii.

meet with men and women meet with women in order to effectively address gender-specific issues head-on.”¹² Through these gatherings, conversations seek to (1) know your sin; (2) fight your sin; and (3) trust your Savior. Fight clubs differ from many connect groups by size, gender separation, conversation focus, and the framework of remaining together indefinitely.

Meaningful Conversation—a conversation that causes people to wrestle with ideas, ask questions, share personally, and go deeper in such a way that feeds the soul and draws people closer to God in their thinking, workplace, family, and other areas of life.

SoulTalk—a term introduced by Larry Crabb in his book *SoulTalk: The Language God Longs for Us to Speak*, referring to what he calls the only honest language and one that “has the power to pull back the curtains on our soul, to move through the mess, and to help each other discover that what we really want is God.”¹³ This language arises from truly connecting with others, arises from one person’s soul to touch the soul of another. In SoulTalk, people reveal and experience profound acceptance of who they really are.

“With-God” Conversation—a conversation between two or more people, where one or more of the participants intentionally partner with God to listen for and respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The term reflects Dallas Willard’s thought in his work entitled *The Divine Conspiracy* – “if I am to be someone’s apprentice, there is one absolutely essential condition. I must be *with* that person. ... And it is precisely what it meant to *follow* Jesus when He was here in human form. To follow Him meant, in the

¹² Jonathan Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 122.

¹³ Larry Crabb, *SoulTalk: The Language God Longs for Us to Speak* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 8-9.

first place, to be with Him.”¹⁴ A “with-God” conversation specifically references being with God in conversation that others might also be with Him.

Description of the Proposed Project

Scope of the Project

This project seeks to create a resource for believers and churches who wish to turn conversations into disciple-making moments. The project will provide a framework to facilitate discipleship by doing the following: (1) examining Scriptures to understand the biblical role that conversations play in discipleship; (2) reviewing general literature to realize a growing need for different conversations; (3) providing a real-life portrait of CityVine’s transition from few meaningful conversations to a growing, disciple-forming culture of with-God conversations;¹⁵ and (4) explaining coaching skills applied to conversations, useful to anyone seeking a basic toolkit for being a great conversational partner.

The project will consist of three stages that will take place in CityVine Church in order to initiate a discipleship culture in the church through intentional conversations and teach this coaching conversational approach to members of the church. In the first stage I will informally spend time at the church speaking with members and observing casual conversations. The purpose of this stage is to ascertain where people stand in their commitment to Christ, what perspectives enable and discourage having “with-God” conversations and how most people in this church have become followers of Christ and

¹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 276.

¹⁵ See Appendix A: “With-God Conversations.”

are currently growing as disciples. I will also interview and survey ministry team members and leaders to gain an idea of the number of current with-God conversations and views toward such dialogue. Churches in New York City and other areas will also be visited and observed to note how with-God conversations are started and the content and style of weekly sermons.

The largest portion of this project will trace the six-month journey of change in CityVine's culture from limited dialogue to a richer culture of engaging questions.¹⁶ This journey will portray how CityVine has begun shifting from a typical church with discipleship expected through programs to one where conversations have begun to grow members organically as they share life together with God. By sharing the journey in this particular context, the hope is that the key elements in this transition will enable the same change to happen in other churches and relationships.

The project will be evaluated in several ways. Group members will be given a survey in June 2014 and August 2014 with seven Likert Scale-based questions and four open-ended questions. An increased number of with-God conversations, both within CityVine and in each person's life throughout the week, will denote success. Another two measures of success will be assessing whether individuals who have engaged in conversations have been brought closer to Christ and whether the main eight participants continued having such conversations after the term of the project ended. This would

¹⁶ The original intention of the project was to have a small focus group of eight to ten interested church members meet weekly for six weeks to learn coaching techniques, practice the skills in the real world, and then review each week. However, through the overlap of coaching training received at AGTS, the reading in preparation for this project, and conversations within an accountability friendship, the project organically evolved into one that profoundly impacted CityVine's leadership team of eight members, who learned to ask good questions, listen well, and engage ultimately in with-God conversations. Rather than a formal, organized journey, the project grew into a natural learning experience for the originally intended eight individuals as our weekly conversations morphed into a learning space for with-God dialogues.

prove the felt value and ownership of this approach. A high level of success will be recognized if an increase in with-God conversations takes place within the rest of the church as observed in casual conversations and noted by leaders and core members of the church. A final group interview will also provide an opportunity to learn what helped most and made the biggest impact regarding the overall experience.

Phases of the Project

The project will include five phases: research, planning, implementation, evaluation, and writing.¹⁷

Research

The first stage of research will examine the Scriptures to provide a biblical-theological basis for the project. The second stage of research will explore the general literature on discipleship to capture current issues and learning pertaining to the role of conversations in the church.

Biblical-Theological Literature Review

The biblical-theological review will provide an understanding of the import of conversations by examining the aim of God with respect to humanity and His relational nature as well as God's use of dialogue in faith formation throughout the Scriptures. The project will provide a resource for the church today to learn about discipleship and its implementation from studying how the Creator continually submits to dialogue in order to fulfill His ultimate desire for people to know Him. The review will also examine the

¹⁷ For this project, the actual implementation happened much more organically than originally planned and successfully realized the project's aim.

Great Commission and New Testament examples of Jesus' conversation to define biblical discipleship and articulate a theology of conversation that has profound implications for discipleship today.

General Literature Review

This research phase will study current views and practices of discipleship along with writings on the state of the Church. As a whole, it will review current literature which generally points to the need for better discipleship and its lack of impact despite appearances of activity and numerical "success." Findings from this research will point to four key shifts that have the potential to refocus today's hyper-individualistic Christians on God, the gospel, and developing disciples: 1) bringing the gospel from the margins to the center; 2) moving from serving individuals to a Christ-serving community; 3) turning the focus from programs to relationship; and 4) moving conversations from monologue to dialogue. Current examples of conversation-based discipleship that address these shifts will be reviewed along with insights from the relatively new field of coaching that can be directly applied to these conversations.

Planning

The planning stage of the project will combine four important interdependent elements that prepare for the implementation of the project: observation of CityVine Church dynamics and context, observation of dynamics found in visited churches, coaching training through AGTS's D.Min. program, and an accountability relationship with a CityVine church member. Observation of CityVine and other churches raises three

hypotheses¹⁸ concerning the impact of conversation and discipleship to be addressed in the implementation of the project: 1) conversations provide a gauge for the effectiveness of discipleship; 2) engagement levels during worship services help measure the effectiveness of discipleship; and 3) worship service structure and style (monologue versus dialogue) influence formation of disciples.

Implementation

The execution of the project will cover an eleven-month journey of CityVine moving away from program-based discipleship to with-God conversational discipleship. The journey will capture the general attempts to turn conversations deeper in church hallways and after-service fellowship and the formation of two leadership groups: Team 5 and STeam,¹⁹ which will engage in intentional conversations over six months of weekly gatherings with the aim of re-shaping the worship service and future direction of the church. The validity of the three hypotheses formed in the planning stage will be tested through the project.

Evaluation

The project will consist of evaluations featuring seven open-ended questions and Likert Scale-based questions given midway in June 2014 and following the field project

¹⁸ The term “hypotheses” will be used in this paper as an “assumed proposition” based on the definition as follows - “a proposition, or set of propositions, set forth as an explanation for the occurrence of some specified group of phenomena, either asserted merely as a provisional conjecture to guide investigation (working hypothesis) or accepted as highly probable in the light of established facts.”

¹⁹ Team 5, named to reflect the age of the church (five years old), consisted of eight individuals with an invested commitment to building CityVine. This team included lead pastor Stephen Jo, his wife Cara Jo, and me along with five others: Austin Ngulube, Jimmy Lee, Victor Sun, Elaine Tai and Nao Onda. This team initially met every two weeks for the purpose of planning and executing. STeam, shortened from Strategy Team, consisted of Stephen, Cara, Elaine, and me. Permission to use names was granted by those in Team 5 and STeam.

in August 2014. The survey will capture the impact of conversations upon the eight individuals in Team 5 and STeam, and tables will record the results in Chapter 4 to identify a comparison of changes that occurred. In addition, a post-field project dinner celebration with the teams will provide an opportunity for reflection on the impact of the field project. As much as possible, the original statements of participants will be recorded in order to convey actual feedback.

Writing

The writing phase of this project will occur between September 2013 and September 2014. Intentional time for a study-focused vacation will be taken twice in 2014 to ensure ample time for necessary research and writing.

Conclusion

The church in America must re-examine the impact of its existence and apply effective approaches to discipleship. At the core of God's design of humanity and the mission of the Church lies an invitation to life with Him. Just as God sought and developed relationship through conversation from the Old Testament to New Testament, dialogues continue to provide powerful potential avenues for believers to grow in life with God and others, a tool that remains largely overlooked. Today's emphasis on discipleship through programs and pre-planned structures can place confining limitations to discovery, question-asking, engagement, and genuine spiritual growth. More can be learned about the actual health of any church through conversations with church members than through reports and attendance rates. These dialogues will most likely reveal a sobering and frightening picture. Great benefits come to the church by learning to have increased with-God conversations and providing an environment that welcomes dialogue.

(1) The Church can experience revitalization and profound impact as questions engage individuals where they are. (2) The deep listening that takes place allows people to move beyond attending because they are heard and seen. (3) The gospel becomes applied as needed rather than squeezed into a one-size-fits-all approach. (4) The Church will experience renewed excitement and passion as people experience personal need and application of the gospel. This project seeks to provide a practical theology of conversation as one means of bringing God back into the center of the Church and discipleship.

CHAPTER 2: BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Data on the American Church today reveals a sobering state of health—a great need for improved discipleship. Christians consist of approximately 22 million Americans out of the United States’ population of 316 million in the year 2013.¹ Contrary to the popular inflated views that 40 percent or so of Americans consider themselves Christian, believers constitute only 7 to 9 percent of the population. The American Church declines by nearly 2.6 million people per decade, a drastic drop equivalent of more than 10 percent.² The numbers, however, reflect only one part of the picture. Barna Group research reveals that within the Church less than one out of every five self-identified Christians (18 percent) claim to be totally committed to investing in their own spiritual development.³ Of 1,871 Christians surveyed nationwide, four out of ten Christians (40 percent) strongly agreed that Satan “is not a living being but is a symbol of

¹ “U.S. and World Population Clock,” United States Census Bureau, last modified July 23, 2014, accessed July 23, 2014, https://www.census.gov/popclock/?intcmp=home_pop.

² John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 22.

³ Research was conducted between 2005 and 2010 and consisted of sixteen surveys by the Barna Group (averaging one thousand random adults per survey) selected from across the forty-eight continental states. “Self-Described Christians Dominate America but Wrestle with Four Aspects of Spiritual Depth,” Barna Group, last modified September 13, 2011, accessed July 23, 2014, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/524-self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth#.U8_V5bHCedw.

evil,” more than one-fifth (22 percent) strongly agreed that Jesus Christ sinned when He lived on earth, and 38 percent strongly agreed—and 20 percent agreed somewhat—that the Holy Spirit is “a symbol of God’s power or presence but is not a living entity.”⁴

Author Brian Brock notes that “Christians no longer seem very good at recognizing the Trinitarian God when He walks in the door.”⁵ These findings point toward a devastating failure in discipleship and a reason for the decline of the Church.

The Church in America will continue to diminish unless current approaches to forming and equipping followers of Christ change. Findings such as the Barna Group studies show the Church needs a fresh understanding of and realignment with discipleship. This chapter will examine discipleship in the Old and New Testaments to understand its principal role in the Church’s mission, identify root principles within discipleship, and provide a theology of conversation to address how dialogues can become “with-God” encounters, with a particular emphasis on the power of questions in such conversations.

Relationship: The Focus of God’s Covenant and Discipleship

At the center of God’s intention in creating and interacting with humankind lies a desire for relationship. God wants people to know Him and experience life with Him. The *Life with God Bible* describes God’s aim in history as “the creation of an all-inclusive

⁴ “Most American Christians Do Not Believe that Satan or the Holy Spirit Exist,” Barna Group, last modified April 10, 2009, accessed July 24, 2014, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/260-most-american-churches-do-not-believe-that-satan-or-the-holy-spirit-exist#.U9EpRrHCedx>.

⁵ Brian Brock, “Discipleship as Living with God, or Wayfinding and Scripture,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 24.

community of loving persons with God himself at the very center of this community as its prime Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant.”⁶ Though sovereign and self-sufficient, God, who has no need of human beings, “has chosen us to realize His sovereign rule in this world in the context of a covenant relationship of loyal love (*hesed*) and faithfulness (*’emet*) where we are to receive His instructions with obedience and trust.”⁷ The covenants God establishes, although for His part unnecessary and inconvenient in every way, point loudly to His desire “to enter into relationship with men and women created in His image.”⁸ At the heart of the Mosaic Covenant lies a call to know God, a knowledge (Hebrew: *yada`*) affecting the heart and will that goes beyond intellectual knowledge to an I-Thou⁹ experience: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God” (Exod. 6:7).¹⁰ As Elmer A. Martens, author of several books on the Old Testament, points out, “for the Hebrews “knowing” is definitely not restricted to the cognitive and the intellectual but reaches into the emotional and experiential.”¹¹ Interestingly, the “verbs of seeing often precede *yada`* for both God (Exod. 2:25; Ps. 31:7) and human beings (1 Sam. 6:9; Isa. 41:20), knowing commonly follows upon seeing ... Verbs of hearing also

⁶ Richard Foster, ed., *Life with God Bible* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2005), 1.

⁷ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 594.

⁸ Alistair I. Wilson and Jamie A. Grant, eds., *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological and Contemporary Perspectives* (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2005), 12.

⁹ Elmer A. Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 193

¹⁰ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version, 2011.

¹¹ Martens, 92.

precede *yada`*, for both God (Exod. 3:7) and human beings (Isa. 33:13).”¹² Knowledge of God touches multiple experiential senses beyond the intellect. The lives of different individuals like Noah, Abraham, and David, as well as the nation of Israel as a whole, demonstrate lives in such an experiential relationship with a living God.

The call to relationship continues in the New Testament as God “who, in Jesus, calls His people to the new covenantal relationship.”¹³ Jesus calls people to “Come, follow me” (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:19 and 10:21; Luke 18:22) and expends His time teaching and guiding individuals and crowds into the ways of God. The covenant call to be God’s people finds equivalent expression in Jesus’ strong statement, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18).¹⁴ The theme of knowing God continually recurs in the New Testament with similar meaning as the Old Testament:

The New Testament emphasizes that knowing God is not simply an intellectual apprehension, but a response of faith and an acceptance of Christ. It is He who has made God known (John 1:18). To know Christ is to know God (John 14:7). Eternal life is to know the true God and Jesus Christ (John 17:3). Paul desires to know Christ in His death and resurrection (Phil. 3:10).¹⁵

Jesus comes to make God known, saying, “If you really know me, you will know my Father as well” (John 14:7). The name Immanuel (“God with us”) “is the title given to the one and only Redeemer, because it refers to God’s everlasting intent for human life—

¹² Terence E. Fretheim, “*yada`*,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 2:410.

¹³ Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 54.

¹⁴ Martens, 251.

¹⁵ Carl Schultz, “Know, Knowledge,” in *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 458.

namely that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God.”¹⁶ In addition to the proactivity of God in extending a covenant to humankind, God’s provision of eternal life made possible through the extravagant sacrifice of His Son on behalf of humanity reveals His passionate desire for people to know Him.

God’s call to relationship can be found at the core of His ultimate command in both the Old and New Testaments: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5). To love means to have relationship. Jesus confirms the centrality of this commandment to the life God desires, naming it as the greatest commandment in the gospels (Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). Walter Elwell aptly describes the relationship between discipleship and God’s relation-based call: “the roots of biblical discipleship go deep into the fertile soil of God’s calling.”¹⁷ In the Old Testament, discipleship can be found in the lived covenant relationship of love between Israel and God as “God was creating a national community that would be His people.”¹⁸ In the New Testament, through Jesus, God has come to be with His people, fulfilling “the deepest meaning of the covenant—God with His people as Master, Lord, and Savior.”¹⁹ Discipleship plays a central role in Jesus’ interactions with His followers, moving towards a “formation of ‘His people.’”²⁰ True discipleship cannot exist without relationship with God.

¹⁶ Foster, xxvii.

¹⁷ Elwell, 175.

¹⁸ Ibid., 176.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ David D. Kupp, *Matthew’s Emmanuel: Divine Presence and God’s People in the First Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 72.

A Deeper Look at Discipleship

Discipleship focuses on deepening God's ultimate goal of relationship and a life with Him. It involves becoming and making disciples as well transformation to Christ-like living, covering a long spectrum from evangelism to increased conformation to Christ-likeness. Study of Jesus' final command in Matthew 28:19-20 and observation of discipleship in the gospel stories reveals four key principles to this with-God life of discipleship: 1) discipleship applies to every believer; 2) every believer has a call to discipleship; 3) discipleship takes place through process; and 4) discipleship calls for with-God conversations.

Discipleship Applies to Every Believer

Disciple can sometimes be a misused word, seemingly applied only to certain believers who by their worship and lifestyle have demonstrated a "black belt level of faith." The term often incorrectly conveys a higher level of commitment and intimacy with God attained only by those "called" to such a life. Many Christians would call themselves believers but hesitate to describe themselves as disciples. As such, it follows that someone with this perception would feel the work of discipleship applies to those who have first earned a higher ranking than they, that of disciple. This view creates a false dichotomy that separates salvation from following Jesus. The idea proves false by examining the usage of the term disciple in the New Testament. In the Early Church to believe in the gospel message meant to be a disciple [to put it another way - to be becoming a disciple].²¹ A comparison of Acts 4:32 and 6:2 shows the words *believer* and

²¹ Michael J. Wilkins, "Discipleship," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 188.

disciple to be interchangeable. Luke oscillates between the two words in other parts of his gospel.²² Michael Wilkins, a scholar who specializes in New Testament theology, Christology and discipleship, supports this view with his study showing “the multitude of ‘believers’ (Acts 4:32) is a synonymous expression for the multitude of ‘disciples’ (*mathētai*) (Acts 6:2), and the expressions ‘those who believe’ and ‘the disciples’ signify the same group of people (Acts 6:7; 9:26; 11:26; 14:21-22).”²³ A believer denotes a disciple and a disciple a believer. As Dietrich Müller notes, the term *mathētēs* in John often simply stands as a term for Christian (John 8:31; 13:35; 15:8).²⁴ Udo Schnelle finds that in Matthew, “to be a Christian means to be a disciple, a way of life that becomes real only in actually following Jesus (4:18-22; 8:23; 9:19, 37-38; 12:49-50; 19:16-18).”²⁵ Even at the start of Peter and Andrew’s call as Christ-followers, Matthew applies the term disciples to them. Matthew 5 records that Jesus’ disciples came to Him when it was only Jesus’ very first teaching. They were called disciples although they lacked faith (Matt. 8:25, 14:17, 14:26, 15:33, 17:19), did not understand Jesus (cf. Matt. 13:36; 15:15; 16:22), and even disowned Him (Matt. 26:56, 26:70). Clearly their lives demonstrated that the term *disciple* did not mean to have first attained a deep level of spirituality. *Disciple* has a broad connotation, ranging from the Twelve appointed to be apostles (Mark 3:13-19), the Seventy sent out on a specific mission by Jesus (Luke 10:1-20), and

²² Ibid., 181.

²³ Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 118.

²⁴ Dietrich Müller, “*mathētēs*,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 1:489.

²⁵ Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 450.

the crowds, some of whom eventually left (John 6:60, 66).²⁶ The various faith levels among Jesus' disciples indicate that discipleship points to a posture of following God rather than a position of spiritual growth.

In addition to “becoming” a disciple oneself, discipleship simultaneously consists of “making” disciples of others. Each aspect of discipleship requires the other. Christians cannot make disciples of others if they themselves do not know and follow Christ. A true follower of Christ cannot possibly refrain from wanting others to know Him, responding in loving obedience to the call of Jesus to make disciples—a life of increased holiness. Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus not only calls individuals into relationship with Him, but also sends them out to help others come to faith. Jesus appoints seventy-two people in Luke 10, sending them out in pairs, to heal and preach about the kingdom of God. In the Great Commission, Jesus gives those identified as disciples directions to make disciples, telling them to baptize and teach others to obey everything He has commanded. After Jesus ascends to heaven, the disciples live to fulfill this commission, growing as followers of Christ themselves even as they lead others to follow Him.

The incorrect perception that discipleship applies only to an advanced level of Christianity points to a lack of understanding of the Greco-Roman and Judaic world in which disciples were common. The audience of Jesus readily understood that *disciple* meant “commitment to a particular master and his way of life, as disciples and masters commonly occurred in both the Judaic and to Greco-Roman world.”²⁷ A *mathētēs* referred to “a committed follower of a great master,” with the master ranging from

²⁶ Robert Banks and R. Paul Stephens, eds. *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 292.

²⁷ Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 39.

religious leader to philosopher or artisan.²⁸ Such a commitment assumed the growth of relationship between disciple and master and “extended to imitation of conduct of the master.”²⁹ Being a disciple meant more than a learner following a great teacher, as Wilkins correctly points out; the term’s usage references John the Baptist’s disciples, who followed him as a prophet rather than students following a teacher.³⁰ Martin Luther’s statements reminding the Church in his day that following Jesus means more than following a teacher applies to today’s understanding of disciple:

Be sure, moreover, that you do not make Christ into a Moses, as if Christ did nothing more than teach and provide examples as the other saints do, as if the gospel were simply a textbook of teachings or laws. ... You must grasp Christ at a much higher level. ... you accept and recognize Him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own. This means that when you see or hear of Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ Himself, with His deeds and suffering, belongs to you The preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to Him.³¹

Discipleship refers to a lifestyle that goes beyond the content from lessons learned to knowing Christ Himself and leading others to know Him. This personal relationship with the Master identifies a person as a disciple more than the amount of theology known.

Every Believer Has a Call to Disciple

As Jesus returns to heaven after His resurrection, He gives his final words to His followers in Matthew 28:18-20: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the

²⁸ Ibid., 78.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 27.

³¹ Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell, eds., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings Third Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 72-73.

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” In this open-ended command to all believers, the participles *going*, *baptizing*, and *teaching* supplement *mathēteusate* (“make disciples”), the only imperative in this statement.

The noun *mathētēs* occurs 264 times in the NT, exclusively in the Gospels and Acts, but the verb *mathētēuō* rarely appears.³² It occurs only four times, three of which are in Matthew (13:52, 27:57, 28:19).³³ The active sense of the verb can only be found in this final statement of Jesus and Acts 14:21. Thus, making disciples embodies the heart of the Great Commission as a unique expression conveyed in command form. Rather than an option that a believer can *choose* to accept as a post-salvation decision, the imperative emphasizes that the call to make disciples goes out to *every* believer.

Fulfilling the call to make disciples of “all nations” requires every believer to take faith beyond a vertical and individual relationship with God and include responsibility for others to know Him. Upon His departure, Jesus expands the reach of the gospel and the call to “make disciples” to “all nations,” thus fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies. Clearly this conveyed a task that the Twelve could not complete in their lifetime. In addition, He promised to be present always until His return, signifying that Jesus desires to continually reach people of all nations and generations until the final day of His return. Every follower of Jesus has the responsibility to make disciples, or to put it another way, to become and make disciples describes the way of life for a Christ-follower.

³² Brown, 486.

³³ Benjamin J. Hubbard, *The Matthean Redaction of a Primitive Apostolic Commissioning: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20* (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature and Scholar's Press, 1974), 84.

A disciple's commitment to Jesus should reflect the master's lifestyle, demonstrating a life proactively committed to being "with" Jesus rather than against or neutral or undecided like the crowds.³⁴ In today's individual-centered society, growth in relationship to God has privatized, fed by personal prayer life, Bible reading, and weekly attendance to church services. Jesus' life testifies to quite the opposite as does his commission to make disciples. Most of Jesus' core disciples did not seek Jesus. One of the unique characteristics of Jesus' style of discipleship appears in His initiative in choosing His disciples. This contrasts with the social norm, where disciples of Socrates and other great teachers selected the master they would follow. In the same way that Christ has pursued them in relationship, Jesus' disciples pursue others—calling them to come to know and follow Jesus. The woman at the well in John 4 runs to share news of Jesus to the very townspeople she originally sought to avoid (John 4:28). Upon following Jesus, Philip finds Nathanael to tell him he has found the One Moses and the prophets foretold (John 1:45). Jesus' commission points His followers toward the world such that the early church "went from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth proclaiming the message of Jesus and making disciples. ... To "make disciples of all the nations" is to make more of what Jesus made of them."³⁵ All take initiative in engaging others to discover Jesus.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus took it upon himself to get to know others, sharing parables and asking questions of those aside from the Twelve, sending those who had been healed back to share the good news of God with others. The Great Commission

³⁴ Wilkins, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 183.

³⁵ Michael J. Wilkins, "Disciple, Discipleship," in *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1996), 177.

reflects a command to continue to live as He did on earth. Jesus does not keep His disciples in an incubated space of spiritual formation but points them outward. Jesus' command to "go and *make* disciples" rather than "go and *become* a disciple" points to the concurrent processes of becoming and making disciples. The book of Matthew demonstrates that "the disciple is outfitted to make more disciples."³⁶ A disciple cannot stop at knowing Christ personally, but must participate in the corporate call to follow the Master in helping others know Him as well. Believers in today's self-centered culture will need to resist the tendency to only seek those who can help them grow rather than seeking out others whom they can help grow.

Discipleship Takes Place through Process

When Jesus calls His disciples, He says to them, "Follow me" (Matt. 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 10:38, 19:21). He invites them to an open-ended journey rather than a series of tasks to "pray this" or "do this" that intercepts each person wherever they may be on the faith spectrum. The words *follow* in Matthew 4:19 and *make* in the Great Commission point to a journey rather than a juncture, a process rather than a point in time. Although some may take Jesus' directions of discipleship as a reference to evangelism, Talbert observes a call to a longer journey with evangelism a first step in his commentary on Matthew: "There is an initial general statement: Make disciples. Then there follow two dimensions of this task: baptizing them is the initial step, and teaching them to observe everything I have

³⁶ Wilkins, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 183.

commanded is the subsequent process. This is to be done as you go. There is an event and a process in the making of disciples.”³⁷

Disciples become disciples, make disciples and continually transform to greater Christ-like living. The present active participles (baptizing and teaching) portray making disciples as going beyond the initial moment of saying the sinner’s prayer and confessing belief. Just as it takes an extended period of learning for apprentices to grow in their trade, the word disciple references a lifelong looking to their Teacher for continued growth and leading. Discipleship, as Craig Keener points out, “is not limited to evangelism; it includes training so that we are also equipping those who will be our partners in evangelism.”³⁸ Jesus’ idea of a disciple portrays those who journey beside Him, becoming ever more like Him. Eugene Peterson quotes Friedrich Nietzsche in describing discipleship as “a long obedience in the same direction.”³⁹

Having a proper understanding of what Jesus means when He calls us to make disciples requires realization that it touches every part of a long faith spectrum in which growth steps vary. Throughout Matthew and the other Gospels, Jesus dialogues with people at different stages of faith: certain hardhearted Pharisees and Sadducees, tax collectors, and “sinners,” people from His hometown who disbelieved, and those who sought Him to grow in their faith. He extends growth opportunities and lessons to those hungry to grow, those indifferent to growing, and those who fail to see their need for

³⁷ Charles H. Talbert, *Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament: Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 313.

³⁸ Craig S. Keener, “Matthew’s Missiology: Making Disciples of the Nations (Matthew 28:19-20),” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* (January 2009): 14.

³⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 17.

growth. Prior to Matthew's decision to follow Jesus, the teachings he probably heard and the various interactions he perhaps had with Jesus or other believers were also part of his discipleship journey, helping him grow as a follower of Jesus. A lifetime of learning and growing lies before and after an initial faith decision and requires intentionality.

"Discipleship is not something we can accidentally drift towards or into. It is something we must give our full attention to, intentionally determining to make ourselves Jesus' apprentices, no matter what the cost."⁴⁰ A study of Matthew shows that discipleship "is lived out in the midst of troubles (8:23ff.); it calls for a willingness to suffer (10:17-25), strength to humble oneself (18:1ff.), to serve others ... (20:20ff.; 25:31-46). As the church commits itself to this way ... it is sustained by the promise of the Risen One to be with His Church (18:20, 28:20)."⁴¹ Following Jesus continues through the various stages of faith and events of life.

Discipleship Calls for With-God Conversations

Conversation provides a primary means for discipling others at all faith levels and exists as a crucial piece in the daily discipleship journey of Christ-like living. Dialogue allows ideas and information to be shared. In recent years, an increasing number of books emphasize witnessing through actions rather than words. A study of the New Testament word *conversation* in the King James Version provides a contrasting insight.

Conversation can translate as "a way of life (life-style)" indicating the way one turns, how one walks or conducts one's life (2 Cor. 1:12; Eph. 2:3, 4:22; Phil. 1:27, 3:20; 1 Tim. 4:12; Heb. 13:5, 7; James 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16; 2 Pet. 3:11). The

⁴⁰ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 327.

⁴¹ Schnelle, 450.

verses utilize the Greek noun *anastrophē* and the verb *anastrephō*. The word-group relates in Hebrew to the word *derek*, meaning road, way, path (Ps. 37:14; Ps. 50:23). Thus Psalm 37:14 (KJV) states as follows: “The wicked have drawn out the sword ... to cast down the poor and needy, and to slay such as be of upright *conversation* [italics mine],” and in the NASB, “The wicked have drawn the sword ... to cast down the afflicted and needy, to slay those who are upright in *conduct* [italics mine].”

Similarly, 1 Timothy 4:12 (KJV) says, “Let no man despise thy youth but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in *conversation* [italics mine], in charity... .” The NASB translates it, “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, *conduct* [italics mine], love...” Ephesians 4:22 (KJV) says, “That ye put off concerning the former *conversation* [italics mine] the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;” which in the NASB states, “that, in reference to your former manner of *life* [italics mine], you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” The biblical word conversation serves as metaphor for a believer’s lifestyle. The believer’s lifestyle, a life with God, literally denotes with-God conversations, which both reflect God and point others to Him. The interchangeability of *conduct* and *conversation* in several NT translations, demonstrating that a disciple’s conversations in word cannot be separated from his or her behavior in deed, reflects the cultural values of Jesus’ times:

The people in the oral communities often felt a sacred tie between oneself and one’s words. Within this context, ... the reliability of the message depended upon the credibility of the messenger. ... If the message relates truth, but the person’s behavior does not, the message holds no weight. Therefore, to deliver any form of truth in conversation a person needed a credible character. ... While parents today

often spout the idiom, “do as I say, not as I do,” this ideal would not register in an oral community.⁴²

Throughout the Gospels, conversation and lifestyle overlap in how Jesus engages and grows people in matters of faith. The context of much of Jesus’ teaching

takes place in rather pedestrian and sequestered settings ... most of His instruction takes place in private conversation with His disciples and even His adversaries. The ways of the kingdom are shared with those who walk with Jesus on the dusty back roads ... or dine with Jesus in the homes of folk as diverse as Pharisees, tax collectors, common laborers, and widows. ... It is in these intimate settings that Jesus did much of His teaching about the kingdom of God.⁴³

Jesus engages people in conversations on faith while in the activities of everyday life. In imitating the Master, following Jesus includes following Him into conversations with others.

Jesus’ command to make disciples cannot be fulfilled through only a personal, vertical relationship with God. Tony Stoltzfus makes an interesting point that “faith comes by hearing the Rhema (spoken word) of Christ, not through hearing the Logos (the written word). To paraphrase, faith comes through experiencing Jesus talking to you. ... So while Logos teaches me about the relationship, Rhema impacts me through the relationship.”⁴⁴ Jesus’ conversations show that the motive, purpose, and content of with-God conversations differ from general ones. With love, Jesus engages the hardhearted and those lacking in faith. In Mark 10:17 a rich young man runs up to Jesus asking,

⁴² Stephen Casey, “Toward a New Testament Theology of Conversation,” in *New Testament Theology of Discipleship, An Anthology*, 2nd enlarged edition, ed. Deborah M. Gill and Tae W. Kang (Springfield, MO: Smashwords, 2012), 16.

⁴³ Karl Allen Kuhn, *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation* (Minneapolis: MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 45.

⁴⁴ Tony Stoltzfus, “Coaching Desire,” *Coach22*, accessed February 14, 2013, <http://www.coach22.com/discover-coaching/>.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Mark 10:21 says, “Jesus looked at him and loved him” before He tells the young man what he lacks. Jesus stops a massive crowd nearly crushing Him to identify the bleeding woman who touched Him, seen as “unclean and dangerous” to the Pharisees, and instead calls her “daughter”—a tender “term of endearment.”⁴⁵ A genuine love for the other underlies a disciple’s conversation.

Through conversation, Jesus challenged, listened, encouraged, and taught. In these dialogues, He joins people at their current faith stage and opens a conversation to point them further along the journey. Jesus answered the antagonistic attacks of the teachers of the law in ways that would stretch their understanding and perspective. He wanted them to realize their spiritual blindness. He told the rich young man the one thing he lacked. He told Martha that her choice to be so busy was secondary to Mary’s decision to sit at Jesus’ feet. Jesus asked questions and listened. His words provided an encounter with God’s truth, love, and grace and stirred responsive people to grow. He continually crossed social boundaries and engaged people in all social strata in conversation. Stephen Casey notes that in a context where Jewish table fellowship demarcated clear ranks at meals “cross-social interaction between high and low classes within a table fellowship became inconceivable.”⁴⁶ Yet Jesus engaged people from different social classes at meals that “were about much more than food and drink. They were social affairs that revolved around debate and discussion.”⁴⁷ Reflecting God’s love for people to know Him despite their history, Jesus begins with a simple request for water from the Samaritan woman at

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theissen, eds., *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 97-98.

⁴⁶ Casey, 14.

⁴⁷ Kuhn, 45.

the well, which quickly becomes a conversation of faith. The conversation continues because Jesus cares about more than quenching His thirst. Jesus' conversations changed lives. They provoked thought. Jesus' dialogues created greater awareness of the existence of God and reveal a life that knows Him.

Through such conversations the Twelve came to learn who counted as great in the kingdom of God. When puzzling over elements of Jesus' ministry, "their private reflective conversations about them seem to have been very significant in the disciples' development and growth."⁴⁸ Nicodemus revealed what puzzled him in a secret dialogue with Jesus. Peter realized his own weakness through conversations held in the courtyard as Jesus was interrogated. Saul came to a living knowledge of Jesus through a supernatural encounter and dialogue. Jesus did not hold conversations just to pass time—His daily conversations helped others know God better. Through divine dialogue and conversations with fellow believers, God ultimately grows people into a more intimate relationship with himself. Scripture captures a "sacred conversation between God and humanity, and a sacred conversation among believers about God, God's will, and what it means to be God's people."⁴⁹ Conversations with God provide a primary means of growing others in relationship with God.

A Theology of Conversation

God initiates relationship and does not leave response to His call to happenstance. He engages people, those who know Him as well as those who do not, in conversation. In

⁴⁸ Geoff Maughan, "Asking Questions Afterwards," *British Journal of Theological Education* 14, no. 2 (February 2004): 127.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

the New Testament, “the first thing Jesus did in order to build His disciples’ faith was to call them to follow Him.”⁵⁰ These conversations found throughout Scripture indicate God’s serious desire to build relationships between the divine and human, between Creator and created, Father and child, infinite and finite. The Old Testament makes clear that the Israelites’ God speaks, and “Israel is remarkably privileged in having Him speak to them ... One of the marks of a false god is that it cannot speak (Ps. 115:5; Is. 41:26; Jer. 10:5). The true God is a God who speaks to reveal himself and His will.”⁵¹ Deuteronomy 4:33 affirms this privilege: “Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?” God uses human language to communicate His Word:

God’s Word is the primary means of revelation in the OT. God’s Word, whatever form it takes, is thus a communication from Him. It is intelligible and articulate, addressed to people in human language so that they may understand and act on it. The OT ... regularly expresses awe and gratitude for such condescension. Human language is assumed to be a sufficient and effective means, if not a perfect one, of communication from God to people. In the OT God speaks always in a context of initiating and pursuing a relationship with people.⁵²

In speaking, God chooses to submit to a dialogue with people rather than deliver a monologue. God places himself under obligation “just as my parents were not obligated to take me to the circus until they promised to do so, so God is obligated, but only by covenant promises freely made. ... To promise is to require something of oneself and, in

⁵⁰ John Ulrick, “A Matthean Theology of Faith Development Based on the Model of Christ with His Disciples,” in *New Testament Theology of Discipleship, An Anthology*, 2nd enlarged edition, ed. Deborah M. Gill and Tae W. Kang (Springfield, MO: Smashwords, 2012), 31.

⁵¹ Buist M. Fanning, “Word,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, Graeme Goldsworthy, and D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 849.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 849.

incurring these obligations, to confer rights on the promise.”⁵³ Speech and conversation distinguish Israel’s God from the idols “who have mouths but do not speak” (Ps. 115:5; 135:16; Jer. 10:5).⁵⁴

God’s desire to teach His people His ways leads to a natural usage of conversation within this relationship. The Old Testament bears witness to conversations with individuals like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Wilkins affirms this idea of God’s call to individuals in the Old Testament by pointing to Isaiah 54:13: “All your children will be taught by the LORD.” Even while the nation as a whole was in covenant relationship with God “the individual was not lost within the nation.”⁵⁵ Rather than monologues or lectures throughout Scripture, divine conversation plays a key role in spiritual formation. Far from being aloof and elusive, God initiates conversations, asks questions though He has the answers, and responds to the complaints and questions of His creation. The all-knowing, all-powerful God present everywhere, takes the time to converse with unknowing, limited human beings. This results in people knowing, experiencing, learning from, and living transformed lives in obedience to His will. Whatever their prior understanding of God, faith grows more concrete and impacts the lives of others as people relate with God through encounter, dialogue and action. From the Old to New Testaments, God interacts with His creation through dialogue. As Westphal points out, the “God of biblical theism

⁵³ Ibid., 529.

⁵⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, “Word of God,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 6:962.

⁵⁵ Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 59.

is a God who acts and a God who speaks.”⁵⁶ A biblical theology of conversation allows deeper appreciation of dialogue as a gift from God and emphasizes the importance of questions in coming to know, and helping others know, Him.

God’s Nature to Engage and Invite Dialogue

The Bible reveals a God who continually initiates uninvited and unrequired conversations and responds to comments, complaints, and requests of His creation. Even prior to covenants and original sin, God engages in dialogue. In Genesis 2, God gives Adam instructions to eat from any tree but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A sovereign God has no reason to bother himself with speech, but God chooses to speak to one solitary man. Though a conversation prior to the Fall fails to be recorded, there appears clear evidence of exchange as God brings the animals to Adam to see what he will name them.

The Hebrew word *dāvār* (word) conveys the idea of the Word of God. Nearly four hundred references to the Word of God exist in the Old Testament, along with the phrase “the Word of the Lord,” which appears over 240 times:

The content of the Word of God also is to be understood in relational terms. God does not simply speak about more objective realities, as if it were simply a matter of data or information that constitutes the Word of God. The various texts reveal a divine concern about a considerable range of matters that bear on the relationship (Num. 12:1-8; Zech. 7:9-10; Gen. 35:10). The word also includes the conveyance of divine emotions or feelings (Num. 14:10-11; Jer. 31:20; Hos. 11:9). Indeed, God’s Word will include the revelation of inner-divine reflections (Gen. 2:18; 8:21; Ps. 95:10-11; Jer. 3:7, 19-20). God’s own self is thus not removed from the Word. The Word is truly revealing of the God who speaks it, and this for the sake of a fullness of relationship.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Merold Westphal, “Review Essay: Theology as Talking about a God Who Talks,” review of *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*, by Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Modern Theology* 13, no. 4 (October 1997): 526.

⁵⁷ Fretheim, 6:961, 964.

The nature of God to engage His creation in speech is evident in both the Old Testament and New Testament. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and hide upon hearing the sound of God walking in the garden. God knew where they were and He knew what they had done, yet in Genesis 3:9 an omniscient and omnipresent God asks, “Where are you?” Other responses were possible: God could have destroyed Adam and Eve and created new humans, pulled the two out of hiding, or simply ignored them. Instead, in the face of their sin, God asks a question with a self-evident answer “not seeking new information but rather trying to induce the suspect to confess to an act that He already knows to have taken place.”⁵⁸ He begins a dialogue.

Genesis 18:16-33 recounts another revealing conversation—this time between God and Abraham. Many biblical stories “present God engaged in intimate dialogue with humanity and even moved to action by conversation with human creatures.”⁵⁹ God reveals to Abraham the impending devastation about to come upon Sodom, where Abraham’s nephew Lot lived. God, who has full authority to punish evil, pauses to provide Abraham with an opportunity to intervene by sharing news that would cause concern. In the dialogue that follows, Abraham challenges God saying, “Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked. . . . Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). Starting with fifty righteous persons, Abraham pleads with God, asking whether He will relent if righteous persons are found in Sodom—all the way down to ten persons—six consecutive questions for

⁵⁸ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1978), 104.

⁵⁹ Kuhn, 11.

more and more mercy. This interchange “derives its meaning from the fact that Abraham and Yahweh are discussing the fate of a particular city.”⁶⁰ Abraham and God have a *discussion*.

In considering this conversation, a number of observations stand out. First, God did not need to reveal His plans, yet He talked about them with Abraham knowing he would not passively acquiesce or support such a plan affecting his nephew. Second, God could have considered Abraham’s push for more and more leniency as defiance and become angry. Instead, from fifty persons to ten, God remains in conversation with Abraham until he stops asking. Third, Abraham’s conversation with God meant something to God, “so when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he *remembered Abraham*, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived” (Gen. 19:29; italics mine). This bears significance when considering that God could have extended mercy to Lot without ever involving Abraham, or He could have destroyed everyone in the city as ten righteous people were found lacking. Instead, God remembers Abraham’s request in the midst of demolishing the cities and rescues Lot, his wife, and two daughters—four individuals. The conversation has impact on both parties. Through conversation, Abraham, the father of God’s chosen people, learns the mercy of God. At the same time, Abraham leaves an impression upon God as well. As one author puts it, “it is a consistent aspect of the biblical portrayal of the relationship between God and human beings that human response is crucial.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Thomas M. Bolin, “The Role of Exchange in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Its Implications for Reading Genesis 18-19,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 1 (September 2004): 54.

⁶¹ Nathan MacDonald, “Listening to Abraham-Listening to YHWH: Divine Justice and Mercy in Genesis 18:16-33,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (January 2004): 41.

Another example of God's actions being affected by conversation with humans happens in Exodus 32:11-14. In response to God's desire to destroy the Israelites who have so quickly moved to worshipping a golden calf, Moses seeks His favor saying, "Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people." Moses asks God to remember His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. And God changes His mind. "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened" (Exod. 32:14). God responds to Moses' request.

The poetry of the Bible also demonstrates an understanding that God invites dialogue. Worshippers come before God, not simply to praise Him but to ask questions, wonder, and even demand answers: "Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God" (Ps. 4:1). "My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?" (Ps. 6:3). "Why have you rejected us forever, O God?" (Ps. 74:1). The pain in the Psalms of Lament portray that "Israel, whether collectively or as individuals, experienced God as One who was involved in life with them," and had an intimate relationship.⁶² These cries point to a God who listens and responds. Though God has no obligation to answer, He answers Job, who attempts to make sense of his suffering: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me" (Job 38:2-3). Far from being passive and distant from the remarks of Job's friends, God expresses His anger to Eliphaz the Temanite and his two friends for not speaking right of Him as Job has. God reveals how He feels and what He's thinking in Job and throughout Scripture. He dialogues with His creation.

⁶² Martens, 161.

The accounts of the prophets also bear witness to a God who regularly has conversations with His creation. God's exchanges with humanity prove to be more than task-delegating monologues. Though the task of calling the Ninevites to repent has been completed, God converses with a sulky Jonah about his anger over God's relenting compassion towards the repentant city. God answers Jonah's anger with a question: "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Job 4:4). Despite misbehavior God still pursues a conversation and extends himself to people. When showing Amos a vision of a basket of ripe fruit in Amos 8, God asks Amos what he sees. God hears and responds to Habakkuk's complaints rather than punishing him for insolent questioning. God expresses His heartache over Israel to Hosea and responds to Israel's answers through Jeremiah. Over and over again, God reveals His nature to communicate with His creation.

In the New Testament, this same nature of God to engage in and invite dialogue can be seen in the life of Jesus. At the time of Jesus, Jews understood conversation and speech as the primary ingredient for their lives in society.⁶³ Jesus takes this cultural norm further using it as a vehicle for other-centered spiritual growth. Jesus calls Matthew, Peter, John, and other disciples to follow Him and spends much time asking questions, teaching, and talking with them. Knowing their desire to trap Him, Jesus responds to the conspiring questions of the Pharisees with questions of His own instead of accusing or ignoring them. While resting by the well, Jesus asks a Samaritan woman for a drink and enters a lengthy dialogue to lead her "to recognize God's gift and to discern Jesus'

⁶³ Sheldon A. Tostengard, *The Spoken Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 33.

identity.”⁶⁴ With the dying daughter of a synagogue leader waiting, Jesus takes the time to listen to the bleeding woman’s story and respond, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering” (Mark 5:34). Throughout the New Testament, Jesus can be seen in conversation with His disciples, His enemies, Jews and non-Jews, men and women, the rich and the poor.

This passing glance of the Scriptures shows that God’s interchanges with His creation go beyond one-way monologues. In fact, throughout the Old and New Testaments, God asks questions—inquiring sentences that open up conversation and invite the other party to contribute as well. The continual conversation and questions initiated by an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God demonstrate the importance of such dialogue to God. God does not leave spiritual formation as an individual assignment where each person takes responsibility for developing their own faith. He enters each person’s journey to converse with the sinner and move him or her deeper. Conversations reflect “intentional, individualized and inspired” disciple making.⁶⁵ God’s conversations provide examples for dialogues held by Christians today with followers of Christ and those who do not yet know Him.

⁶⁴ Peter C. Phan, “An Interfaith Encounter at Jacob’s Well: A Missiological Interpretation of John 4:4-42,” *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 27, no. 2 (July 2010): 169.

⁶⁵ Alice Fryling, *Disciplemakers’ Handbook: Helping People Grow in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: 1989), 18.

The Role of Questions in the With-God Dialogues of Discipleship

Questions play an essential role in Jesus' dialogues. As Brock says, following Christ begins with the question, "How do we learn to recognize the voice and claim of the living God in our daily lives?"⁶⁶ The lessons learned from observing Jesus' questions can be powerfully applied to every disciple's journey no matter their level of spiritual maturity or where those they speak with are on the faith journey.

His aim, as the Great Teacher of men, was, and ever is, not to relieve the reason and conscience of mankind, not to lighten the burden of thought and study, but rather to increase that burden, to make men more conscientious, more eager, more active in mind and moral sense. . . . That is to say, He came not to answer questions, but to ask them; not to settle men's souls, but to provoke them; not to save men from problems, but to save them from their indolence; not to make life easier, but to make it more educative. We are quite in error when we think of Christ as coming to give us a key to life's difficult textbook. He came to give us a finer textbook, calling for keener study, and deeper devotion, and more intelligent and persistent reasoning.⁶⁷

J. Ramsey Michaels notes that using questions "to solicit divine revelation was a familiar technique in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature (and in later gnostic writings)."⁶⁸

The Son of God, who knew far more than His conversation partners, asked a good number of questions. Jesus' questions reflect a desire to dialogue with people. Asking such questions "mirrors the manner of God's relationship with us."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Brock, 23.

⁶⁷ Herman Harrell, *Teaching Techniques of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1982), 51.

⁶⁸ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 852.

⁶⁹ Joseph H. Britton, "Something to Say: Pastoral Leadership and the Word," *Anglican Theological Review* 91, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 93.

Scholars differ on the number of questions Jesus posed. Roy B. Zuck says he has counted 225 different questions of Jesus.⁷⁰ Perhaps the exact number matters not as much as the fact that Jesus clearly asked questions. Though He knew what was in human hearts (John 2:24-25), He still asked questions. Because of His questions, the disciples had to consider why they were so afraid (Matt. 8:26); the invalid explained that he had never been able to enter the pool when it was stirred (John 5:7); the woman at the well discovered the Messiah (John 4:29); and Peter articulated his belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). In discipling people, Jesus did not center His teaching in one-way monologues. He asked questions. As Zuck says, good questions can

arouse student interest and curiosity, lead students to think more clearly about a subject, stimulate discussion, help teachers ascertain what students know, obtain student opinions, guide learners to new facts or ideas, encourage students to express themselves, correct students' misconceptions, clarify issues, present proofs or arguments, and exhort students to action.⁷¹

Study of Jesus' questions demonstrates that they played an invaluable role in leading others into a closer relationship with God in three key ways: 1) inviting interaction; 2) promoting learning; and 3) engaging the will.

Questions Invite Interaction

Jesus desires His people beside Him, helping others know Him better. His methodology for making disciples involves getting people engaged, regardless of their current belief, in progressing in their own faith process through asking questions. Though He could have easily given monologues of great wisdom, Jesus instead asks many

⁷⁰ Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 237.

⁷¹ Zuck, 235.

questions. Though He has the best answer, Jesus asks. His question leaves one “to begin to make the connections,” which statements or advice-giving do not allow.⁷²

Questions let the other person know that they are wanted—that what they have to say matters. In Mark 10:51 Jesus asks the blind man what he wants done rather than acting out of assumption. It can be easy to remain disengaged if told something. However, when personally asked a question, one’s mind begins to think and respond. Questions provoke self-thought—what do I want? What do I know? Do I agree or disagree? What would be a good answer? Asking and answering questions invites participation that can lead to the bigger invitation of discovering more of God.

Questions also invite interaction because they contain a posture of humility and love. Asking assumes that one does not have all the answers and/or that the other party has something to contribute. When statements carry opinions or information, the form conveys a sense that one has an answer or solution for the other person. Jesus, the Son of God, Rabbi beyond all rabbis, demonstrates such a posture of humility and love. Jesus could have healed the two blind men who followed Him but instead He first asks, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” (Matt. 9:28). His question causes them to reflect and see if they have faith in Jesus. By asking this question, Jesus gives the two men room to talk and shows them the role their faith plays in receiving this miracle. Their healing becomes more dignified than a handout.

⁷² Conrad Gempf, *Jesus Asked* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), Kindle: Chapter 7, Location 465.

Questions Promote Learning

Jesus' method of asking questions reflects a learner-focused style. He cared about how His disciples were growing. Lee Wanak notes that "Jesus used questions as a way of countering the enculturated consciousness of His day," describing "enculturated consciousness" as "consciousness shaped by culture and traditions absorbed during our formative years," which affects everyday behavior in significant ways.⁷³ Zuck finds that Jesus asks His disciples sixty-four different questions; to thirty-two individuals or small groups He poses sixty-two different questions; to His adversaries He asks fifty questions; and to various crowds He asks forty-nine questions.⁷⁴ The following study of Jesus' questions reveals they promote learning by 1) helping to "see" and "be seen," 2) reframing reality; 3) prompting personal discovery; and 4) allowing for inquiry.

Helping to See and Be Seen

Questions offer doors of mystery that allow the questioner to see and the one questioned to be seen, giving no guarantee of what the answer will hold. In with-God dialogues, asking questions means willingly entering the unknown of the other person and hearing what they have to say, whether the answer brings pain, surprise, or delight. Answers need not fit with a personal agenda or meet with personal approval. Jesus asks to prompt discovery. Most of the questions the Pharisees ask⁷⁵ Jesus differ greatly in motive, seeking to trap rather than increase learning. Their questions expect certain answers. These questions do not fit into the with-God conversation paradigm as they do

⁷³ Lee Wanak, "Jesus' Questions," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 2 (April 2009): 167.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁷⁵ Matthew 22:15, 12:10, 16:1, 22:15-17; Mark 8:11, 12:13-15; Luke 6:7, 11:53-54.

not truly value what the other person has to say nor seek to help the person grow. Instead they look to trap and destroy the other person.

A willingness to see others flows from a heart of hospitality. Hospitality to the stranger has its roots in ancient Middle Eastern cultures and in particular, the Hebraic tradition. It remains central to lives of faith. Abraham and Lot extended hospitality to strangers who turned out to be angels. Jesus reached out to the marginalized. Hospitality, willingness to receive and welcome another, can be shown in creating space for questions to be asked and received in love. When Jesus sat and stayed to speak with the Samaritan woman, more than everyday conversation, His questions and continued dialogue came from a heart of hospitality. He willingly remained to spend time with the woman, despite her being a Samaritan woman with a past. Jesus' questions conveyed a willingness to offer hospitality by extending the gift of His time, engaging a "messy" life many might stay away from. He gave the gift of His presence in the present: "Spiritual journeys ... have become more difficult. Timetables stand in our way. Spiritual journeys require a sensitivity to *being in the present*."⁷⁶ When the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years touched the fringes of Jesus' garment (Luke 8:44, ESV), He paused to ask, "Who touched me?" (v. 45). Jesus stopped, for "she must realize that Jesus knows and approves."⁷⁷ Jesus took the time to see people.

The best learning happens when personal need and learning intersect. Each disciple requires different information and understanding in order to grow. Without

⁷⁶ Jim Fowler and Sam Keen, *Life Maps: Conversations on the Journey of Faith* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978), 5.

⁷⁷ Gempf, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 7, Location 551.

seeing a person, discipleship dialogue can easily skew toward areas of personal interest or desire rather than meeting the other person in his or her need. It takes questions to better understand what might be helpful for growth. While Jesus was reclining at dinner at a Pharisee's house, a weeping woman poured perfume on His feet, kissing and wiping them with her hair. Jesus asks Simon the Pharisee, "Do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44). By asking the obvious, He invites Simon to take a second look at a woman he has judged as a sinner worse than himself. The question prods Simon to see and the careful use of pronouns accentuates the contrasting three actions of hospitality exhibited by Simon and the woman.⁷⁸ As Jesus expounds on the question by comparing the woman's extravagant love to Simon's halfhearted hospitality, Simon would have to realize that his sight had been lacking, both in how he views the woman and how he sees himself. Jesus did not leave this mistaken Pharisee who had mistreated Him to stay where he was. Jesus could easily have written off Simon as a judgmental Pharisee who would never change. Instead, He saw where Simon lacked in faith and asked a question to provoke growth rather than make a closed statement. Value of others and their growth is shown by a willingness to ask questions of those encountered—even those who seem unlikely to change.

Asking questions means being willing to follow answers into unfamiliar territory to see others. Like the Good Samaritan who willingly stopped to ask what was needed by the man lying half dead on the road, questions asked can unearth information that will cost something. They can result in information costly to a person's schedule or ideals.

⁷⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 311.

The answers or questions received in return may stretch personal theology. Through all this, questions allow one to see others, engage individuals' true selves, and thereby better provide learning that intersects real life.

Reframing Reality

Scrutinized by religious leaders who often desired to catch Him in some way, Jesus continually reframes their reality through His questions. By confronting and critiquing common misconceptions, Jesus' questions permit new perspectives. One day, while walking with His disciples through grain fields on the Sabbath, Jesus' hungry disciples begin to pick some heads of grain and eat them. Upon seeing this, the Pharisees tell Jesus, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:2). Jesus responds, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ... Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:3, 5-6). According to the Talmud, rabbis expressed that it was lawful to "work" on the Sabbath if it involved saving a life. The Mishnah emphasized an understanding of the priority of life to law stating the following were allowable on the Sabbath: providing food to a pregnant woman who grew faint from smelling food, feeding anyone seized by a ravenous hunger even with unclean things until the person's eyes are "enlightened," dropping medicine into the mouth of one with pain in his throat if there was a possible danger to life, and clearing away ruin from anyone upon whom a building fell down.⁷⁹ Jesus answers their understanding of the Law with two examples of similar behavior

⁷⁹ Cf. Yoma 8:5; 8:6; 8:7, *The Mishnah: A New Translation*, trans. Jacob Neusner (London: Yale University Press, 1988), 278.

where neither receives punishment because of the Law. Jesus' questions cause the Pharisees to wrestle with the meaning of what is unlawful. His question pointed out that "hunger trumps legal rules" and the "temple trumps the Sabbath."⁸⁰ Jesus' question pushed the Pharisees to acknowledge and reapply this situation with a precept already within Pharisaic teaching that they would have likely known.

Another day, Jesus enters the synagogue where a man with a shriveled hand happens to be present. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, the Pharisees ask Him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (Matt. 12:10). According to Exodus 31:14, the penalty for profaning the Sabbath was death. In response, Jesus answers, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep!" (vv. 11-12). Again Jesus reframes the idea of what is lawful through His question. The Pharisees consider the act of obeying all the written rules as law-abiding. Though healing is not specifically forbidden, the Mishnah generally conveys an aversion to healing except in the face of life or death. The limb of a child is not to be straightened nor a broken limb set; one should not pour cold water over a dislocated hand or foot.⁸¹ However, rabbinic views softened during a later period; "some said that articles might be thrown in to the hole to allow the animal to climb out, others that it might be fed on the Sabbath but lifted out the next day, but a concluding ruling is that the relief of the animal suffering should be allowed to override the Sabbath

⁸⁰ Talbert, 151.

⁸¹ Cf. Shabbat 22:6, *The Mishnah: A New Translation*, trans. Jacob Neusner (London: Yale University Press, 1988), 206.

regulation.”⁸² By pointing out how actual practice softened in the face of a sheep in need, Jesus reframes the situation in a new light through His question. If the Law could be broken for a sheep that falls into a pit, how much more for a man in need! Jesus’ question prods the Pharisees to look beyond fulfilling the written words of the Law and understand the heart of it. It exposes an attitude the Pharisees had toward their livestock that didn’t translate toward their people. Jesus’ question prods them to face their own contradictory behavior. Unless Jesus asked, they would easily have continued their views. Jesus’ question provides an opportunity to see anew a person in need on the Sabbath. His reframing questions pointed people to discover a new perspective and often challenged the status quo, calling people to move out of tradition and into discovering deeper truths and intentional living.

Prompting Personal Discovery

At times, Jesus asks direct questions of those He encounters, forcing them to answer and articulate what they believe and prompting personal discovery. While walking in the region of Caesarea Philippi, a city known for worship of foreign gods, Jesus asks His disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They reply, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matt. 16:14). Jesus then asks another question, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” (v. 15). This question evokes the famous declaration of Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). Jesus could have easily told them who He was, but the story would be quite different if Jesus took this route; no record of Peter’s declaration

⁸² R.T. France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 465.

would exist. By asking questions, Jesus invited people into the learning process. It is very different to be told, “I am the Messiah” than to be asked, “Who do you say I am?” The question prompts discovery—it causes one to look inside of oneself and find what one truly believes about Jesus. Being open-ended and direct forces a response. Such questions invite and ask a person, “What do you think?” Peter’s answer incurs a blessing from Jesus; “recognition of Jesus’s identity is something that the Father gives because only he knows the Son.”⁸³ In Matthew 8:23-27, Jesus addresses the disciples’ fear before calming the storm, asking, “You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” (v. 26). In the midst of a storm and seemingly understandable fear, Jesus’ question forces the disciples to examine their faith.

Jesus intentionally grew His disciples; what they believed and how they saw Him mattered. He knew that the amount of information He relayed was not everything. It was not true learning unless the disciples demonstrated they knew truth for themselves and could articulate it. Jesus used questions, good questions, to cause people to reflect and think critically. Much of Jesus’ teaching takes place in parable, a form of question. By painting a picture of the truths of the Kingdom instead of giving straightforward answers, Jesus seeks to “begin cultivating in them the disposition of discernment in dialogue. ... Jesus did not want His followers simply to parrot theological maxims back and forth, but to reflect creatively with one another, as He did with them, what it means to welcome the saving rule of God into their lives.”⁸⁴ In doing so, Jesus encouraged a culture of discipleship that extended beyond a reliance on His presence and teaching.

⁸³ Talbert, 194.

⁸⁴ Kuhn, 45.

John 16:30 points out that the disciples felt the value of questions in learning and promoting personal discovery, for they respond to Jesus, “Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God.” They saw someone who still needed to learn as requiring questions to be asked of them. Traditional Jewish rabbinic teaching valued asking questions as a way of helping disciples learn. In Jewish thought, “the ability to anticipate questions and not needing to be asked is a mark of divinity,”⁸⁵ just as Jesus points out that “Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matt. 6:8). Questions help people grow by prompting personal discovery, and Jesus “both asked questions and was asked ... for the benefit not of himself but of those whom He asked questions or by whom He was asked.”⁸⁶ Jesus engaged disciples as active participants in their own growth.

Allowing for Inquiry

In some religious systems, questioning religious leaders would be unthinkable and offensive. In such organizations, questions become signs of a lack of faith or of rebellion. At times, in churches, tight authority structures cause congregation members to hesitate in questioning the pastor, elders, or spiritual leaders of the church. Learning happens by swallowing whole the teachings from the pulpit or classes. Questions have no place within these structures of authority.

⁸⁵ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 2010), 479.

⁸⁶ Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture New Testament IVb John 11-21* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 222.

In contrast, the Scriptures show a different picture. The God of Israel does not see questions as insulting or disrespectful. God does not ask for blind obedience; He desires genuine growth—He dialogues, hears complaints, shows openness to questions, and tosses back questions in return. As Conrad Gempf says,

When you start arguing with Yahweh, He smiles, rolls up his anthropomorphic sleeves, and starts to look interested. The strangest thing is that He likes losing the arguments even more than He likes winning them. Jacob, the trickster, is beloved of God. And Abraham didn't just get away with asking, 'What about if there are only twenty righteous men in the city?'⁸⁷

Similarly, Jesus modeled an acceptance of questions. He willingly allowed questions and answered them, even those of religious leaders intent to trap Him. Some Pharisees came to test Jesus and asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matt. 19:3). Meeting people where they are, instead of an argument, Jesus uses the proposed topic of law “as a springboard from which to launch a more fundamentally ethical pronouncement.”⁸⁸ Jesus replies with Scripture and teaching to increase learning. When the disciples ask, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (18:1), Jesus does not get upset at their lack of maturity. Placing a little child among them, He answers their question.

Jesus interacted with people in ways that demonstrated a high level of engagement—asking and answering questions. His many questions showed openness to receiving questions. The Samaritan woman responds to Jesus' question with one of her own. The disciples continually approach Him with questions, asking clarification on teaching and behavior they do not understand (Matt. 13:10; 15:12, 34; 17:19; 18:21). The

⁸⁷ Gempf, Location 1299.

⁸⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 715.

freedom to ask questions allowed people to interact with God at the juncture of their questions.

Questions Engage the Will

Spiritual growth requires partnership with others in discipleship. Jesus asked questions knowing His involvement was only one-half of discipleship. The person addressed also has the responsibility to respond. Response requiring change in behavior requires engagement of the will. Through questions Jesus elicited desire and provided accountability, the two elements needed to drive the will into action. In response to Jesus' question, the two blind men receive the healing they ask for and immediately after, follow him. Jesus' question given in response to their cry for mercy "leads to some measure of discipleship on the part of the ones cured."⁸⁹ A disciple does not mature from knowledge alone. Knowledge needs to translate into a desire which catalyzes action. Action benefits from accountability to continue moving forward.

The will does not always do as a person wishes. Often it needs a deeper spark that comes from connecting to desire. Questions allow for custom-tailored learning to uncover that desire. When people experience freedom to ask, they can ask and receive answers to what they really want to know. Without such freedom, conversations stifle personal discovery, desire lies dormant, and the will remains unengaged.

Accountability provides another important piece in engaging the will; it helps keep persons on track with following through on desired actions. Questions serve as helpful accountability partners by helping people articulate where they are in faith, where

⁸⁹ Craig L. Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew*, vol. 22 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 310.

they need to go, and what keeps them from moving forward. They reveal progress or lack of such and help one examine oneself. Discovering desire and having accountability provide two critical pieces to engaging the will, the engine of life, and questions can serve as an important tool in both of these areas.

By Drawing Out Desire

Upon leaving Jericho, two blind men sitting by the roadside hear Jesus going by them, so they shout, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!” (Matt. 20:30). The crowd tells them to be quiet but instead they grow even louder. They try their utmost to catch Jesus’ attention, which demonstrates they must have heard of His reputation for teaching with wisdom and authority, healing the sick, and casting out demons. Cries for mercy are shouted to someone who can help. Though it seems so obvious that the blind men want to see, Jesus stops, calls them, and asks, “What do you want me to do for you?” (v. 32). He does not immediately proceed to heal them. Jesus’ question causes the two men to first articulate publically what they desire and believe for, and quite possibly and more importantly, to realize it for their own selves. Voicing a longing aloud turns a wish from amorphous thoughts into a concrete desire. Questions create space to give voice to true desires and can help elicit affirmations of faith.

Another time, Jesus walks by the Pool of Bethesda. Among the crowds of the blind, lame, and paralyzed, Jesus discovers one invalid who has been in this condition for thirty-eight years. Rather than immediately healing the man, Jesus asks him a question: “Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6). By addressing the assumption that sick people want to get well, the question shifts to the man. To answer, he may have any of the following questions running through his mind: “Do I want to get well? Does it seem like I

don't want to get well? I've been here thirty eight years, so what's the point of wanting to get well? Am I still lying here because I didn't want to get well enough by going into the pool? Have I really tried to get well these past thirty-eight years?" One would think that after such a long period of waiting, the man would have given a resounding "yes!" Rather, the invalid gives an excuse for his illness. In his defeated answer one can hear a desire weathered with fatigue from years of trying: "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me" (v. 7). The answer provides a rather diluted yes. In answering Jesus' question, the man would have realized his level of desire to get well. The question drew out his inner desire or, rather, uncertainty: "the question ... was not an inquiry made from ignorance about something that was clear and evident to all, but an act to stir up more fervent desire and to urge him to ask with the greatest zeal."⁹⁰ By asking the question, Jesus cares enough to first arouse desire for the sake of the invalid.

Jesus' direct questions of "Do you want to get well?" and "What do you want?" drew out each person's desire. Identifying desire provides a powerful drive to move forward toward meeting a desire. The invalid who had not found enough strength or motivation to get into the pool first for thirty-eight years found himself, after answering Jesus' direct question, gathering his strength to get up and walk as Jesus commanded. He found his desire. If he had given up hope, he would not have tried, disbelieving the offer. Jesus, motivated by love, desired to give more than a miracle handout. In love, he

⁹⁰ David R. Maxwell, trans. *Cyril of Alexandria Commentary on John Volume 1* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 138.

extended a question that affirmed the man's value, allowed him to realize his desire, and offered him a glimpse into God's love and care for him.

By Offering Accountability

Accountability helps keeps people on track with a specified goal or target. Disciples do not grow or move forward best in isolation. On the journey, they benefit from the help of others to warn, encourage, and support them—the three major categories of the work of accountability.⁹¹ Beneficial accountability meets people where they are and gives impetus to move forward, calling forth personal commitment.

Engaging in conversation itself calls us to accountability: “To speak is to take up a normative stance in the sense that by speaking I incur rights and responsibilities. I become accountable.”⁹² Questions act as powerful accountability vehicles. “Jesus used questions to activate faith and commitment. Jesus wanted people to make up their own minds. He nurtured their thinking by challenging conventional wisdom and setting the stage for spiritual growth.”⁹³ Consider what would have happened to the woman at the well had Jesus never questioned her. Jesus could have sat leaning silently by the well as she drew water. As a Samaritan and a woman, she would have avoided conversation with Jesus. The same holds true elsewhere. Jesus could have walked by the invalid at the Pool of Bethesda. The day would have just been one more in a long list of days spent sitting by a pool with diminishing hope. Jesus could have taught the crowds and His disciples and never asked questions of them or the religious leaders who sought to trap Him; however,

⁹¹ Ibid., 168.

⁹² Westphal, 528.

⁹³ Wanak, 178.

Jesus did not live this way. He opened the conversation by asking the Samaritan woman, “Will you give me a drink?” (John 4:7). His question breaks customary boundaries and extends an invitation to dialogue. “Will you give me a drink?” offers accountability by intercepting the woman and beginning a conversation that moves her toward freedom from shame.

Jesus’ questions provide accountability through challenge and direct questions.

Lee Wanak describes the accountability of Jesus’ questions as that which “activate faith and commitment.”⁹⁴

Jesus tested the faith of the blind and mute, asking first, “Do you believe I am able to do this?” (Matt. 9:28). After healing the man born blind Jesus asks, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” (John 9:35). After calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asks His disciples, “Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:25). At the grave of Lazarus Jesus tells Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me ... will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26). Each of these questions activates faith by giving focus to God’s work in specific contexts.⁹⁵

Jesus’ direct questions provide a mirror allowing people to look within and identify their faith. In John 13:38, Jesus questions Peter, “Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!” In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tosses out probing questions to the crowd:⁹⁶

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ... If that is how God clothes the grass of the field ... will He not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” (Matt. 6:26-31).

⁹⁴ Wanak, 175.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

His parables, questions in the form of stories, “force the people with whom Jesus is conversing to take a stand and make a decision.”⁹⁷ Jesus’ questions drive people to a place of honest self-examination:

... Jesus didn’t exert undue pressure on you to land on His side of the fence. He was not in the convincing business, He was in the provoking business. His goal seems to have been to present people with opportunities to choose—perhaps even to *force* people to choose ... because an answer is not good unless it’s a genuine answer.⁹⁸

Questions provide accountability, causing one to face whatever the question addresses. Without the accountability of Jesus’ questions, miracles could have happened without greater discovery. Jesus, however, refused a life of a lone miracle worker. He actively engaged others in life and prevented passivity by asking questions, “for the truth about God and man cannot be learnt directly as if it were a series of mere facts which involved no personal commitment.”⁹⁹ Through questions Jesus provided accountability for growth.

Conclusion

For the church in the United States to grow disciples requires first understanding the foundation as God’s call to relationship. The Creator desires to know and be known by His creation, and discipleship describes the lifelong journey of growing in relationship with God and leading others into the same. In responding with belief in Jesus Christ, a person simultaneously becomes a believer and a disciple who seeks to grow in living all of life with a God who speaks and welcomes dialogue, ever becoming more like Christ.

⁹⁷ Gempf, Location 1704.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 1729.

⁹⁹ Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1996), 131.

Such a life requires growth in recognizing the voice of the living God in daily life.

Without community, this journey of recognizing and living in response to God becomes impossible. Thus the Great Commission, Jesus' final instructions, calls all believers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching others to obey everything Jesus has commanded.

This chapter has sought to provide a definition and understanding of discipleship within the context of relationship, with an examination of the dialoguing nature of God to realize the import of a theology of conversation for discipleship—in becoming and making disciples as well as a life-long journey toward greater Christ-like living. God, by nature, desires relationship rather than aloof worship. Though incurring cost, heartache, and ultimately the sacrifice of His beloved Son, God extends himself to individuals and nations—asking questions, making statements, listening, and responding. Conversation provides the primary vehicle throughout history by which people grow in relationship with God, and it deserves particular attention in application to discipleship. By studying dialogue in the Scriptures, disciples today can greatly benefit from reexamining conversation as a means for furthering personal and corporate intimacy with God.

One's view of discipleship critically impacts how one goes about making disciples. If discipleship primarily means bringing someone to an initial confession of faith, countless believers in churches will never move beyond an initial decision of faith in Jesus. If discipleship means a rigorous training ground meant for the spiritually elite, opportunities will be missed for those exploring the idea of God or those outside the Church. However, if discipleship is properly understood to include the entire range of people, from those who show no interest to those who have a daily thriving relationship

with God—knowing that each one has another step to go and the gospel applies to all people—believers will recognize a myriad of opportunities for obeying Jesus’ command. Believers will also see that they themselves have much to learn. They have something to share with others and something to learn from others on their journey.

Conversations reflect intentional disciple making. Far from a program, Jesus demonstrates the power of conversation in discipleship through His twelve core disciples. More than two thousand years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Church launched through these twelve followers of Jesus still stands strong. No record of a class or program for developing such lasting pillars of faith can be found in the New Testament. Instead the pages record many conversations. Jesus intentionally pursued people in conversation and these dialogues prompted many to make initial decisions of faith, delve deeper within existing faith journeys, and provided a strong foundation for the birth of the Church.

Discipleship requires intentionality. It does not happen in a vacuum nor do disciples somehow drift into maturity. Through questions, Jesus invested the effort to grow others in faith. Through His questions Jesus confronted individuals and forced them to identify what was known or believed. They opened doors to conversations and invited participation. The questions engaged minds, prompting learning and personal discovery. Jesus’ questions helped reframe situations and broadened awareness. They expanded and deepened conversation. As Christians extend themselves to others through questions seeking the other’s growth, they reflect the heart of Jesus inviting others to a deeper journey with God.

Conversation cannot be divorced from Christian conduct, and if they are serious about knowing, living like Christ, and helping others know God better, believers must learn how to ask good questions. If believers follow Jesus' example into everyday conversations, daily interactions at the grocery store, workplace, and home can become critical stepping stones of faith to those met on the life journey. Discipleship through conversation has explosive potential to empower a living faith and relationship with God across the Church and through the Church to the world.

CHAPTER 3: GENERAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Every Wednesday at Smalls, a tiny jazz club in Greenwich Village of New York City, a tap session takes place. As a jazz band plays, any tap dancer can step to the floor and beat out a rhythm of self-expression—what they want to say to the music. The novice tapper might tentatively put together a few timid phrases, while the professional tapper approaches the floor with confidence and executes complex syncopated scrapes and taps on the small wooden floor. Whatever the level, the audience appreciates the contribution of each dancer and provides receptive space to speak and occasionally tap together.

Tap essentially serves as a conversation—between the music and the dancer, between the tappers and the audience, between all present. This weekly Wednesday tap session beautifully portrays how engaging, creative, and life-giving the Church could be if Christians were to create similar dialogue spaces that allow each person to speak, listen, and receive a response.

Recent discipleship literature unveils an alarming picture of many American churches failing to form disciples. Despite all the signs of activity—church hallways bustling with chatter, church parking lots filled with cars entering and exiting, church seats filled weekly by hundreds of thousands of believers, and countless groups gathering for Bible study, choir practice or other activities—there exists a decrease in spiritually mature believers. The state-of-the-art equipment and well-executed service plans paint false facades of health within many church gatherings, achieving less than their outward

appearances in actuality. Larry Crabb, well-known Christian psychologist, notes the harmful reality existing in many performance-driven churches, “Churches, by no means all but too many, have become as dangerous to the health of our soul as porn shops. People leave both superficially titillated and deeply numbed.”¹ Discipleship needs a new approach, one that fits today’s context.

A deeper look reveals that much of the negative trend in the American Church today stems from individualism. A cursory look at today’s consumer market shows gadgets, services, advertisements, and conveniences catering to the individual. Competitive consumerism often singles out the stories of individuals and products rather than the bigger story and “the individual is no longer seen as part of a larger whole to which he is somehow bound and obligated.”² Although this individual-centered lifestyle can be found in most urban settings globally, the American Church exists within a greater hyper-individualistic culture than most countries. Stephen Hong notes in his article in *The Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, “more than anywhere else, individualism took on distinctive meaning and central importance in America.”³ He attributes it to America’s history of rebellion against the suppression of individual rights, fighting for independence, and the rugged individualism needed to survive in a harsh new land. In fact, out of seventy-six countries, Dutch anthropologist Geer Hofstede found America to

¹ Larry Crabb, *Soul Talk: The Language God Longs for Us to Speak* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 16.

² Gil Dueck, “Inwardness, Authenticity and Therapy: Charles Taylor, the Modern Self and the Implications for Modern Discipleship,” *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 11, no. 3 (May 2011): 13.

³ Stephen Hong, “Reversing a Downward Spiral: Strengthening the Church’s Community, Holiness and Unity through Intentional Discipleship,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 2012): 96.

one of the most individualistic nations in the world with an individualism rating of ninety-one.⁴

This heightened sense of individualism impairs relationships, privatizes theology, and ultimately hinders pursuit of Jesus. The prioritization of the individual weakens the mission of the Church because if “a group of people does not share any common beliefs and purposes, then the highest virtue must be to tolerate each person's beliefs and behavior.”⁵ Despite meeting in small groups, individualism prevents true community and depth from forming in these gatherings.

The gospel weakens through skewed theologies, and there exists prevalence of what Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls “spiritual tinkering,” where individuals pick and choose elements of spirituality according to their own liking. Individualism leads people to put preference and personal ideas above the gospel. Adult spiritual beliefs, collected in 2009 in a nationwide survey by The Barna Group, testify to this fact.⁶ Discipleship and churches weaken as individuals personalize the gospel according to their preferences like their tablets and smartphones.

All the things that result from the influence of hyper-individualism upon Christianity—privatized faith, lack of accountability, weak relationships within the church, nuanced theology—result in Christians who live out their lives as they see fit rather than in submission and surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ and in service to one

⁴ “What about the USA?,” The Hofstede Center, accessed July 22, 2014, <http://geert-hofstede.com/united-states.html>.

⁵ Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 48.

⁶ Calvin Miller, *The Vanishing Evangelical: Saving the Church From Its Own Success* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 172.

another. The mission of the Church to make disciples of all nations loses precedence and the gospel becomes forgotten.

In recent years, however, awareness of the need for change grows. This chapter reviews current discipleship literature to identify recent shifts in defining discipleship in the American Church, four discipleship models demonstrating these shifts toward forming followers of Christ through conversation, and best practices from coaching for developing such conversations. After all, “we discover our identity in the context of community. We learn best together, with the help of other people.”⁷ The first part of this chapter will discuss four key shifts that have the potential to refocus Christians on God and the gospel and develop disciples: 1) bringing the gospel from the margins to the center; 2) moving from a community that serves individuals to a community that serves others; 3) turning the focus from programs to relationship; and 4) moving conversations from monologue to dialogue. Conversations play a key role in each of these four shifts. After initially exploring each shift, the latter part of chapter 3 comprises of two sections that will attempt to show 1) current examples of this “new” approach to discipleship, and 2) best practices learned from the field of coaching to help every Christian grow in his or her ability to engage in what will be termed with-God conversations.

Four Shifts in Defining Discipleship

Discipleship Shift 1: Bringing the Gospel from the Margins to the Center

This first shift of centralizing the gospel in discipleship provides foundational understanding for the remaining three shifts in approaches to discipleship. The new, or in

⁷ Steve Ogne and Tim Roehl, *Transformational Coaching* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 54.

actuality renewed, definition of discipleship erases a long existing dichotomy between evangelism and discipleship by placing the gospel at the heart of the Great Commission. Common use of the phrase “sharing the gospel” in correlation with “evangelism” conveys the mistaken, unbalanced view that the gospel is mainly needed to be saved. It gives the impression that the gospel acts as a “spiritual ticket to guarantee a reservation in heaven”⁸ without much use afterward. With such an emphasis on entrance into heaven, a life of submission to Jesus and following His mission seems optional. When the gospel becomes mainly connected to evangelism, Scripture is divorced from discipleship, making the latter something different or “something more ‘advanced’ like theology, piety, or social justice.”⁹ When held central, the gospel enables a balanced understanding of discipleship, where non-Christians are called to “more than belief to obtain a ticket, and discipleship to more than spreading an anemic gospel which must be beefed up through spiritual disciplines or social justice.”¹⁰

With the gospel as anchor, the renewed definition of discipleship calls for a return to the New Testament and fresh realization of discipleship as the responsibility of every Christian. To be a Christian means to be a disciple, make disciples, transforming continually into Christ-like living. Everyone has a part to play in discipleship and everyone must grow. Understanding the vital role of every believer, Francis Chan writes, “The members of the early church took their responsibility to make disciples very

⁸ Jonathan Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 36-37.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

seriously. To them, the church wasn't a corporation run by a CEO. Rather, they compared the church to a body that functions properly only when every member is doing its part."¹¹

The renewed embrace of the gospel as fundamental to all aspects of a disciple's life means increased time spent in Scripture. Study of the gospel becomes essential to discipleship as "a disciple of Jesus, then, is someone who learns the gospel, relates in the gospel, and communicates the gospel."¹² A disciple comes to know Jesus through the gospel and lives for Him through the gospel. Life Transformation Groups (LTGs) started by Neil Cole, founder and executive director of Church Multiplication Associates (CMA), and Fight Clubs started by Jonathan Dodson, author of *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, place reading and studying Scripture at the core of weekly gatherings.

Christians fight struggles with sin by turning to Scripture for truth and gospel application. This demonstrates change from many small group curricula that examine Scripture verses topically or not at all. The study of Scripture corrects the diverse theological views that have emerged in today's hyper-individualistic age. Rather than individual preferences, disciples seek to live out what God says in His Word. This shift toward Scripture application by Christians views the gospel as necessary to keep faith alive in disciples. Dodson aptly describes the damage that emerges from lack of engaging the gospel:

I have become painfully aware that people tend to drift away from the gospel soon after their conversion and begin to try their hand at sanctification. ... In the end, people become exhausted and miss out on the joy of knowing and walking with the Spirit of God. They miss out on intimacy with Jesus. This is why I think Paul

¹¹ Francis Chan, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciple* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Distribution, 2012), 34.

¹² Dodson, 37-38.

keeps preaching the gospel to people who already know it. He does it in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.¹³

With the shift to place the gospel central, it serves as a unifying anchor and fuel for a Christian's daily life.

Discipleship Shift 2: Moving From a Community that Serves Individuals to a Community that Serves Others

Marketing in the public sector often focuses on the individual experience and churches seem no different as they compete with the world to gain a hearing. Churches are full of conveniences to make individual experiences better from entering to exiting the parking lot or church doorway. Such a strategy leaves it to the individual to choose, making corporate life optional and faith a private journey. In such a community, one can easily interact regularly with people and still be alone. Mark Brouwer, pastor and leadership coach, shares how after twenty years as a pastor he found he had “gotten really good at relating to people with warmth but not honest transparency.”¹⁴ The danger of isolation for leaders that he describes rings true of any isolated person: greater susceptibility to sadness, loneliness, anxiety, stress, discouragement and temptation.

Today's shift from the individual-serving community to a community that serves others embraces a new definition of discipleship that returns to a true community of interdependence, understanding the impossibility of the faith journey without fellow sojourners as theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer so well describes:

¹³ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴ Mark Brouwer, “The Friendless Pastor,” *Leadership Journal* (March 2014), accessed March 25, 2014, <http://www.ctlibrary.com/le/2014/march-online-only/friendless-pastor.html>.

The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again, when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. ... The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother.¹⁵

This kind of discipleship understands the daily fight to trust in God and live by the gospel and that each Christian needs others in this battle to keep faith alive and requires what Dodson calls a "conversion-to-community,"¹⁶ a shift in heart posture from being self-centered to other-centered.

The move from a community that serves individuals to a community that serves others means the focal point and purpose of relationships change. It becomes less about what the community does for the individual, "What's in it for me," and more about what Christ desires. In seeking Christ, the community becomes "one that serves ... never for the sake of itself but ever for the sake of its Savior."¹⁷ The individual seeks what they can do to serve others, "How can I help?" In hyper-individualistic America, "the fundamental *in curvatus in se* orientation (curved in on ourselves) of the human condition (termed such by Augustine), can, by the power of the gospel of the God who is for us, transform his community to be *ex curvatus ex se*, turned toward the other."¹⁸ Small groups offer one of the best examples of what this change looks like.

Small groups have long played an important part of how churches develop Christ followers in community, from the book of Acts to monastic movements such as in Celtic

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Life in Community* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1954), 22-23.

¹⁶ Dodson, 111.

¹⁷ W. Madison Grace II, "True Discipleship: Radical Voices from the Swiss Brethren to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Today," *Southwestern Journal Of Theology* 53, no. 2 (March 1, 2011): 152.

¹⁸ Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 67.

Christianity, Anabaptists, and the Moravian church, and they play a significant part in contemporary church life. A 1996 survey found that four in ten of all Americans belong to a small group—a large proportion of these linked to the church.¹⁹ Kevin Watson observed in 2013 that a Google search of the phrase “small groups” retrieved “a ridiculous 21 million results” and that searching the same phrase on Amazon.com yielded “16,292 results.”²⁰ Today, one year later, a Google search shows 394 million results and 447,336 results on Amazon.com.²¹ Small groups are present everywhere.

Despite existing to provide community within the church, high attendance of small groups does not naturally result in effective discipleship due to their self-serving focus. Small groups can become social places where people gather but fail to grow. The focus remains on filling individual’s needs and desires rather than on following Christ such that “they are more occupied with the group members themselves, promoting mutual help, empathy and encouragement ... and the God at the heart of the small Christian groups is a God of comfort, support, love and security.”²² A study by The Barna Group corroborates this soft faith and lack of depth in Christian small group community:

Many self-identified Christians do not take their faith community seriously, whatever type it may be, as a place to which they should be open and held to biblical principles. Only one out of every five self-identified Christians (21%) believes that spiritual maturity requires a vital connection to a community of faith.

¹⁹ Roger Walton, “Disciples Together: The Small Group as a Vehicle for Discipleship Formation,” *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 8, no. 2 (December 2011): 100.

²⁰ Kevin W. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Wilmore, KY: SeedBed Publishing, 2014), 148, Kindle.

²¹ Google search conducted on June 11, 2014.

²² Walton, 107.

Further, only one-third (35%) claims to have confessed their sins verbally to another believer at some point during the past quarter.²³

Despite group life together, small groups with a self-serving focus have failed to provide a true community that reflects Christ-like living.

With shifting toward a community that serves others, Christians let go of preserving self in favor of the sake of others. Crabb's answer to the question of why spiritual community is so rare is, "I suspect it has to do with the requirement of brokenness. We'd much rather be impressively intact than broken. But only broken people share spiritual community."²⁴ Small groups look different when the community's purpose becomes helping each individual follow Christ. They no longer take the form of biweekly or monthly small group gatherings of eight, marked by optional attendance and discussion guided by set curriculum where people rarely interact outside of these gatherings.

Discipleship goes beyond a program to doing life together, and getting together becomes a regular weekly and infrequently, a bi-weekly, occurrence. Individuals push beyond the appearance of relationships that characterize a society interconnected on social media and web platforms—what Philip Meadows calls "telepresence"²⁵—and strive for a real in-person presence in other's lives. Instead of coming together primarily to know others or learn content, the community now gathers to know God better.

²³ Barna Group, "Self-Described Christians Dominate America but Wrestle with Four Aspects of Spiritual Depth," Barna Update, last modified September 13, 2011, accessed May 6, 2014. https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/524-self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth#.U2mEJVe8_xt.

²⁴ Larry Crabb, *Becoming a True Community* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 27.

²⁵ Philip R. Meadows, "Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture," *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 29, no. 2 (October 2012): 168.

Failure, struggle, and sin fill the conversation as much, if not more, than success in order to fight for truth and the gospel in the real every day battles of each Christian's life. Recognizing the battle it takes to live for Jesus each day, Christians relinquish individualism and become active participants in community, knowing they need others, and others need them. As such, a Christ-serving, gospel-centered community emerges; the corporate life strengthens the witness of the Church as "exceptional character in individuals cannot prove the reality of Christianity."²⁶ The corporate witness reflects that of Acts 2, where the life of true community provided convincing evidence of the reality of God.

Discipleship Shift 3: Turning the Focus from Programs to Relationships

More and more, churches emphasize relationships, paralleling the understanding that people best learn to follow Jesus in the context of friendships or personal interactions. Relational discipleship honors the unique life seasons and backgrounds of each person, morphing to meet the person being discipled where they are rather than expecting individuals to adjust to a generic discipleship lesson. Prior to recent focus on relationships, discipleship efforts primarily focused on programs such as Bible study groups, discipleship training meetings, new believer groups, and Wednesday night prayer meetings. Such programs sought to teach discipleship through a mass one-size-fits-all approach limited in adequately serving the diversity and varied life seasons present in any group.

²⁶ Tim Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 311.

The shift to relationship requires time, and it becomes “vital to take a step back and ask ourselves if we live at a pace that allows us to be available to those who live around us.”²⁷ Alan Roxburgh, pastor and consultant with more than thirty years’ experience in church leadership, points to missionary Lesslie Newbigin to show how the gospel must be read through the lens of others. The truth of a missionary overseas applies well in today’s cross-cultural context in America:

Newbigin was always a deeply evangelical, orthodox Christian, but in India he came to understand the extent of his captivity to the canons of modernity and the West and his assumption that these canons were the right and only ways of reading the gospel. He discovered he could not simply arrive in India, learn the language, and then “give” the gospel as if it were some disembodied, abstract set of propositions that, like a Lego piece, can be plugged in anywhere. India required him to hear and read the gospel all over again in ways he would not have discovered had he stayed in the United Kingdom.²⁸

A focus on relationship means taking the time to understand another’s cultural lens and learning to communicate to be heard rather than assuming others will understand.

The shift from program to relationship involves going beyond neat workbooks and getting to a place that affects the heart and the mind. In his book, *The Vanishing Evangelical*, Calvin Miller defines one of the main reasons for the decline of the church in America as “poor internal relationships within the church.”²⁹ Most people leave the church because of a painful emotional injury that causes them to avoid organized religion. Christians must learn to establish relationships on genuine love for the person. Fundamentally, people want to be known and Miller affirms this human need: “All of us

²⁷ J. Pathak, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 43.

²⁸ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 35.

²⁹ Ibid.

are highly communal. We all want to be known and esteemed—maybe even loved—by others. Nothing short of this view can explain reality TV, *American Idol*, and the hundreds of talk shows and interview shows that comprise current television formats.”³⁰ Relationships built on love let people be known, experience value, and respond to inquiries of the heart and soul.

The shift from program to relationship requires transparency and honest revelation of an individual’s weaknesses rather than one’s success stories. Rick Richardson’s thoughts on evangelism apply to building relationships:

Often we think of evangelism as sharing our strengths, having it all together spiritually. We think that's what it means to be a witness. . . . Our weakness, our story of struggle, even the truth about the cost of our choice to follow God—these are the greatest gifts we have to give to others in their journey.³¹

The weaknesses experienced by each human being become an important connecting point with anyone, and people’s greatest asset is their humanity—their “weaknesses, doubts and questions.”³² Turning from program to relationship requires vulnerability, as “people aren’t interested in our answers unless they feel we have the same questions and struggles they do. Being human is much more important than being an expert!”³³ “Being human” allows others to “be human” as well, and in the context of discipleship, allows for application of the gospel where people really reside.

³⁰ Miller, *The Vanishing Evangelical*, 180.

³¹ Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 23.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Discipleship Shift 4: From Monologue to Dialogue

Programmatic discipleship often takes a monologue approach. Delivery of information usually happens one way, whether from pastor to congregation, teacher to class, small group leader to group members, or discipler to disciple. Communication theory has proved this one-way delivery as a “most ineffective teaching tool.”³⁴ Although it allows delivery of content *en masse*, actual learning can best be realized in a relationship of dialogue. Wolfgang Simson, author of *Houses That Change the World*, observes, “The participatory and kinetic model is most effective in changing opinions and values and therefore in changing people. Some of the reasons for this are that it is simply more humane; it is part of real life, not in an artificial environment; it is driven by real people with real and existential questions, not according to some theoretical textbook and an agenda printed far away.”³⁵ Dialogue goes deeper than a surface conversation and has transformative impact, aptly described by David Benner as

... richer than simple conversation, advice giving or communication. Dialogue involves shared inquiry designed to increase the awareness and understanding of all parties. In dialogue I attempt to share how I experience the world and seek to understand how you do so. In this process each participant touches and is touched by others. This results in each person's being changed.³⁶

Transformation to Christ-like living, at all faith stages, best happens in the context of dialogue spaces that allow people to exchange information and grow from the process.

³⁴ Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World* (Waynesboro, GA: OM Publishing, 2001), 85.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship & Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 54-55.

Shifting to dialogue involves sensitivity to another's viewpoint. Today's diverse spiritual landscape means every conversation becomes a cross-cultural experience. Every person brings a unique cultural lens to the conversation—a characteristic strengthened by American individualism. Dialogue allows the different “language houses”³⁷ people hold to be heard and understood. Words like God, prayer, and worship no longer have widely shared definitions, and “conversion today is more like learning a second language from scratch.”³⁸

William Peel and Walter Larimore present a helpful version of James Engel's faith scale, detailing “Micro-Decisions of Faith”³⁹ faced in six stages of maturity ranging from cynic to disciple.⁴⁰ Their insights can increase sensitivity in conversations to the different struggles faced in maturing in Christ. The movement from monologue to dialogue requires sensitivity to others and effort to refrain from using insider church language and assuming understanding. Without such other-centeredness, dialogues become duo monologues or what David Fishelov calls “dialogue-of-the-deaf,”⁴¹ where participants exchange words without listening or understanding.

These shifts in definition expand discipleship to touch the life of every Christian and bring following Jesus down to a heart level. As discipleship moves from a gospel on the margins to a lifestyle dependent on Scripture, from communities serving individuals

³⁷ Roxburgh, 80.

³⁸ Richardson, 52.

³⁹ William Carr Peel and Walter L. Larimore, *Going Public with Your Faith: Becoming a Spiritual Influence at Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 24.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ David Fishelov, “Types of Dialogue: Echo, Deaf, and Dialectical,” *Semiotica*, no. 195 (June 2013): 250.

to ones serving others, from program to relationship and from monologue to dialogue, the shifts inevitably impact the shape, content, and delivery of conversations. They become deeper, more honest, and much more than just daily, casual occurrences. Such dialogues, called with-God conversations in this project, provide the language of gospel-centered discipleship. Eugene Peterson, well-known for his Bible translation, *The Message*, writes, “The conversations that take place in the parking lot after Sunday worship are as much a part of the formation of Christian character as the preaching from the sanctuary pulpit,”⁴² They serve as powerful discipleship vessels, helping others move forward in the faith battle involved in knowing and pursuing Christ.

With-God Conversations: Critical Conduits of Effective Discipleship

Soul-touching dialogues, referred to as “with-God conversations” in this project, serve as dialogue spaces reflective of the four shifts in discipleship: Scripture informs content, others become the focus, engaging in the dialogue comes from loving relationship, and conversation flows both ways. With-God conversations are powerful and life-transforming and not limited to only mature believers just as discipleship refers to growth within a broad faith spectrum from pre-believers to long-time followers of Christ. Crabb pens a profound vision for the potential of the capability of every Christian:

I have strong reason to suspect that Christians sitting dutifully in church congregations ... have been given resources that if released could powerfully heal broken hearts, overcome the damage done by abusive backgrounds, encourage the depressed to courageously move forward, stimulate the lonely to reach out, revitalize discouraged teens and children with new and holy energy, and introduce hope into the lives of the countless people who feel rejected, alone, and useless.⁴³

⁴² Eugene H. Peterson, *The Wisdom of Each Other: A Conversation Between Spiritual Friends*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 20.

⁴³ Crabb, *Connecting*, xiii.

Crabb's compelling belief comes from trusting the potential of the Holy Spirit, the power of God dwelling within every Christian. By partnering with the Holy Spirit through listening and obedience, rather than responding with common sense or easy answers, with-God conversations change lives.

Where no commitment to Jesus exists, with-God conversations can serve as a supernatural witness:

At the core of non-Christians, however, is the same capacity for relationship that exists at the core of Christians. Everyone was designed to connect. In non-Christians, though that capacity is functionally dead, there is a haunting memory of what once was, a lingering appetite for what could be.

When a person possessing the life of Christ pours that life into non-Christians, the memory gets clearer, the appetite deepens.⁴⁴

With-God conversations are powerful, supernatural partnerships with God that spur both Christians and non-Christians toward Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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Content of with-God Conversations

With-God dialogues are marked by a few key characteristics, such as confession and transparency, confrontation, questions, observations, ideas, personal stories and application of the gospel. Not every conversation will have all of these elements but many will have at least the latter in a search for more of God in both dialogues with Christians or non-Christians. In every with-God conversation, there exists intentional partnership with God.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36.

Confession and Transparency

Confession results from self-examination and proves critical to any person's growth in God. As Scott Sunquist writes in his book on the Christian mission, "every local church must work toward greater and greater levels of holiness. Founded upon the grace of God, which calls us to confession and repentance, the community is ever welcoming, but also ever transforming."⁴⁵ Many small groups have an accountability element to their gatherings but as described earlier, those marked by individualism rarely see revelation of real struggles and greatly differ from the confession shared within other-centered with-God conversations.

Dodson describes the numbing of sin done by the former: "Accountability groups become circles of cheap grace, through which we obtain cheap peace from a troubled conscience. Confession is divorced from repentance This approach to discipleship is hollow. It lacks the urgency required by the fight of faith."⁴⁶ Rather than hollow easy remarks aimed at helping someone move on from sin, true confession seeks to unearth the real issue and recapture one's authentic identity in Christ. Dodson articulates confession well: "confession isn't to be viewed as a ritual bargaining chip we cash in to obtain a clear conscience . . . when we confess our sin in true repentance, we come to our senses in Jesus. We return to ourselves. Confession of sin is a kind of repentance from being inauthentic."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Scott Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 291.

⁴⁶ Dodson, 66.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 68.

With-God conversations allow a person to find the true self in Christ and identify the false self. Crabb makes a profound observation in noting that

C. G. Jung once observed that modern psychotherapy arose partly in response to the void in Christian community left by the Protestant insistence on private confession. We no longer struggle together with our deepest concerns and internal battles. Religion ... is a personal matter between us and God, where we keep our distance from others ... we end up being less than honest with him as well.⁴⁸

The deeper issues that moved into the counselor's office return to everyday conversations once again, as believers fully submit themselves to others in order to pursue the truth of the gospel in their lives. The guilt pervading Christian community today comes from not knowing how to confess to God and others and as Jan Johnson expresses, "We are as sick as our secrets."⁴⁹

Pursuit of Christ means secrets have no place in Christian community. Honest confession in community allows for gospel application and the experience of grace. It ultimately draws Christians deeper into Christ by exposing a daily need and appreciation for His cross and grace. Such confession can also serve as a witness to non-Christians drawing them closer to the One who addresses their own sins.

Transparency marks with-God conversations, lovingly welcoming people to show who they really are in order to live authentic lives in Jesus. Genuine confession requires transparency and such conversations allow the gospel to go from a neat sermon to real truth wrestled with in the messiness of life. These conversations feed the soul, stirring desire to move through the ugliness of abuse, addiction, fatigue, and depression toward

⁴⁸ Crabb, *Connecting*, 98.

⁴⁹ Jan Johnson, "Connecting with People On the God-Level" (lecture, Renovaré Conference, Houston, TX, April 3, 2014).

the fullness of God. With-God conversations heal and change lives. From such authentic self-disclosure of struggle and sin comes something beautiful:

When members of a spiritual community reach a sacred place of vulnerability and authenticity, something is released. Something good begins to happen. An appetite for holy things is stirred. For just a moment, the longing to know God becomes intense, stronger than all other passions, worth whatever price must be paid for it. Spiritual togetherness ... creates movement: Togetherness in Christ encourages movement toward Christ.⁵⁰

Transparency and confession enable with-God conversations where Christians can experience and bear witness to an authentic God who intersects the brokenness of humanity for every person on earth.

Gospel Truth

With-God conversations are marked by knowledge, study, and answers found in the gospel. In dialogue, response derives not from the best answer in one's mind but from what God says. With-God conversations hold tightly to incorporating the gospel in confronting sin to lead toward gospel living. As such, Scripture and identifying sin emerge in daily conversation with Christians and non-Christians. As Tim Chester and Steve Timmis point out,

Above all we model the culture for one another so that it becomes the normal thing to do. We need Christian communities who saturate ordinary life with the gospel. The communities to which we introduce people must be communities in which "Godtalk" is normal. This means talking about what we are reading in the Bible, praying together whenever we share needs, delighting together in the gospel, and sharing our spiritual struggles, not only with Christians but with unbelievers.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Crabb, *Becoming a True Community*, 22.

⁵¹ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total CHURCH: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 65.

In gatherings, as people confess, application of the gospel provides those present the opportunity to see how the gospel helps fight one's own struggles, doubts, and fears.

Applying the gospel in with-God conversations requires knowledge of the gospel. It entails conversion to what Dodson calls a "text-to-theology" life: "If the Bible isn't central, you will end up relying on yourself and one another. You will find it difficult to get past conversations about life. However, if the Bible is central, you will be more likely to respond to God and rely on the gospel."⁵² The centrality of the gospel must be communicated continually; without such emphasis, other things such as the mission of the church or legalism will become central. Keeping the gospel in with-God conversations takes effort and nothing replaces first-hand reading of the Bible.

Discovery Through Questions

With-God conversations are marked by less telling and more questioning, less giving of answers and more asking. Rather than approaching as an expert with answers, participants in such dialogues trust God's activity at work, seek to discover Him and respond as Jesus would. One asks questions of the Holy Spirit and of those with whom they talk. Questions infer openness to discovery. "We cannot ask the questions of what God is up to in our neighborhoods and communities when we think we already know."⁵³ Questions beautifully open doorways for exploration that may take one into unknown, unfamiliar territory where no prepared answers exists. Questions help uncover God's activity. They create new learning opportunities and reliance on God. New ideas,

⁵² Dodson, 137.

⁵³ Roxburgh, 126.

perspectives, and facts may be encountered and as such, leave one changed—a daunting idea for anyone unwilling to change or be in control.

Among Christians, in sharing struggles, questions help “discern ungodly motivations and get to gospel motivations.”⁵⁴ The following questions help cultivate gospel motivations:

1. What do you desire more than anything else?
2. What do you find yourself daydreaming or fantasizing about?
3. What lies do you subtly believe that undermine the truth of the gospel?
4. Are you astonished with the gospel?
5. Where have you made much of yourself and little of God?⁵⁵

Such questions provide a starting point to provoke thought and discovery, leading people to explore the happenings of their hearts, minds, and lives. “The wise person recognizes that questions are often more important than answers. . . . To offer an answer is to shut down the quest and stifle the spiritual hunger that it reflects.”⁵⁶ Questions provide a way to love others as the benefit often falls upon the one being asked.

Questions can serve to open the door wider to what Crabb calls “door openers,” comments that people can first drop to test the waters in order to see if anyone listens and has interest to pursue involvement. To a question of how things are, a door opener can be as simple as, “Oh, Okay—could be better.”⁵⁷ A gentle response, such as “How so?” invites the person to open the door wider and provides increased opportunities for gospel truth to be applied to his or her life.

⁵⁴ Dodson, 138.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 155-156.

⁵⁶ Benner, 166-167.

⁵⁷ Crabb, *Connecting*, 154.

With-God conversations seek to benefit the person being engaged in dialogue and asking questions validates a person. Peel and Larimore note that asking questions in conflict situations sends several positive messages:

- I value your opinion. It opens the way for a dialogue instead of a monologue. Asking a question says, “Tell me what you think.”
- I’m not trying to cram something down your throat. Asking a question takes the adversarial tone out of the picture. It says, “Let’s compare what you think to what I think, and see if we can come to some mutual understanding.”
- I want to understand what you are really asking. Asking a question communicates that you value the other person.⁵⁸

These points apply to asking questions in all conversations. Questions open the door to discovery and allow for personalized discipleship. Each Christian’s struggles, questions, application of the gospel, and theology can differ from that of another believer. Through questions, rather than answers, people are invited to be themselves. A space that allows for questions allows people to be heard.

Four Models of Effective Conversational Discipleship

Several authors have written on the remarkable potential of discipleship through dialogues similar to with-God conversations and how they enable these exchanges to happen at their churches. These four models provide fresh vibrant examples of how churches can encourage the maturing of disciples who grow and grow others in knowing and becoming more like Jesus. These models take into account the existence of future sin and help “plan ahead for life as sinners.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Peel and Larimore, 172.

⁵⁹ Peter K. Nelson, “Discipleship Dissonance: Toward a Theology of Imperfection amidst the Pursuit of Holiness,” *Journal Of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 87.

Fight Clubs

Started by Pastor Jonathan Dodson at City Life Church in Austin, TX, fight clubs are “small, simple groups of two or three men or women who meet regularly to help one another beat up the flesh and believe the gospel of grace.”⁶⁰ These groups powerfully exemplify how with-God conversations between Christians further discipleship. Fight clubs are based on the need for Christians to fight in order to realize their faith:

Real faith is fighting faith. Once the fight begins, we must never stop fighting Gospel transformation comes through pain, struggle, suffering, and staring your ugly sin right in the face. The trick is to stare it down with truth. Nobody sins because they want to be deceived. We sin because we believe what sin offers is true. ... Sin lies to us. We need to get in the habit of talking back with the truth.⁶¹

Each gender-specific group effectively addresses issues specific to men or women. These fight clubs form out of personal relationships that people have rather than the church connecting individuals. Dodson notes the importance of such relationships in context of what occurs in fight clubs: “Good fighting springs from relationships of trust. So how do they work? Three ways: 1) know your sin, 2) fight your sin, 3) trust your Savior.”⁶² Fight clubs meet weekly to identify sin and confront it with the gospel. The church encourages reading the same biblical text during the week to ensure that people know the gospel in order to fight for the gospel to be real in each other’s lives. As Dodson writes, “If the Bible isn’t central, you will end up relying on yourself and one another However, if the Bible is central, you will be more likely to respond to God

⁶⁰ Dodson, 122.

⁶¹ Ibid., 59.

⁶² Ibid., 122.

and rely on the gospel.”⁶³ In addition to studying Scripture, fight clubs take time to examine their sin.

As you move from theology to life, inject your life struggles and successes into the conversation. Allow plenty of time for this. Ask one another questions. Graciously press one another to discern ungodly motivations and get to gospel motivations. This is not a Bible study; it is a fight club. Share your lives, not just your insights. Adorn the gospel by confessing sin and repenting well. Remember, Christ is sufficient for your failures and strong for your successes. Take it all to the Lord Jesus in faithful prayer for one another, on the spot, not just afterward.⁶⁴

The belief that repenting Christians are growing Christians motivates fight clubs. Dodson references Redeemer church pastor Tim Keller’s remarks on repentance: “All-of-life repentance is the best sign that we are growing deeply and rapidly into the character of Jesus.”⁶⁵ Keller goes on to say, “The purpose of repentance is to lead us into true joy. The intoxicating joy of the Lord exposes our lesser joys for what they are—false and empty—and leads us to faith in the true and rewarding promises of God.”⁶⁶

Inside and outside of these fight-club dialogues, an on-going conversation with the Holy Spirit provides power and insight for each conversation:

Instead of assuming a dialogue with your reason, enter into dialogue with the Spirit. Talk to Him and ask Him for clarity, direction, and power to believe the gospel. In a word, surrender! Surrender to the Spirit’s promptings, follow His nudging, and talk to Him about it along the way. When we surrender to the Spirit we become ourselves in Jesus. We walk in a shared delight that so cements us to the Lord that we develop a missional holiness. Communion with the Spirit releases the power of the Spirit so that we can follow Jesus and make disciples.⁶⁷

⁶³ Ibid., 137.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁵ “All of Life is Repentance,” Redeemer Presbyterian Church, accessed July 19, 2014, http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/All_of_Life_Is_Repentance-Keller.pdf.

⁶⁶ Dodson, 85.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 100-101.

The approach to fight club dialogues carries across to conversations with non-Christians as well. The core value of community that forms the backdrop for fight clubs serves as a powerful communal witness to non-Christians. Characteristics of fight club dialogue such as transparent sharing, honesty, and the gospel continue to naturally exist in the conversation with non-Christians present. Such dialogue can be had with anyone:

The overlap of Christians and non-Christians can happen naturally over meals, at birthday parties, and in service to your city. ...

When you gather like this, be sure to look for opportunities to talk about the deeper things of life, to love people well by listening to their struggles, doubts, and fears. ... Apply the gospel to yourself out loud with non-Christians. Be transparent and authentic with them. Instead of hiding your faith and the deep grace you have found in Jesus, talk about it in natural ways. As you do, be sure to pray to the Lord of the harvest for spiritual fruit, and then watch the harvest grow!⁶⁸

Fight clubs differ from accountability groups, which serve as temporary places of confession where individuals stop at the relief of confession instead of fighting the sin. Through application of the gospel, fight clubs powerfully exemplify what with-God conversations can look like. At the core, there exists a continuous dialogue with the Holy Spirit, an honest examination of sin, study and application of Scripture and an embrace of community as the primary context through which the fight of faith can be won.

Life Transformation Groups (LTGs)

Life Transformation Groups (LTGs) started by Neil Cole, has helped start over seven hundred churches in thirty-two states and twenty-three nations in six years. The LTGs provide a way for the Church Multiplication Associates (CMA), a voluntary association of church networks united by a common mission, to reach their goal, which

⁶⁸ Ibid., 112-113.

states, “We want to lower the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple.”⁶⁹ The format of LTGs overlaps that of fight clubs:

A Life Transformation Group is made up of two to three people, all of the same gender, who meet weekly for personal accountability in the areas of their spiritual growth and development. A group should not grow beyond three but multiply into two groups of two rather than a single group of four. If a fourth person is added to the group, it is recommended that the group consider itself “pregnant” and ready to give birth to a second group. After the fourth person has demonstrated sufficient faithfulness to the group for two to three weeks, the group should multiply into two groups of two.

There is no curriculum or training needed for the LTG. A simple bookmark that stays in the participant’s Bible is all that is needed. The LTG accountability consists of three essential disciplines for personal spiritual growth—a steady diet of Scripture, confession of sin, and prayer for others who need Christ.⁷⁰

LTGs resemble fight clubs in their gender-specific gatherings, small size, heavy emphasis on reading Scripture, and confession of sin. They differ by growing through splitting the group. Fight clubs will continue with the same persons and have no more than three individuals. Growth in fight clubs occurs by bringing in a third or fourth person interested in starting their own group who attends with the understanding they will attend only two weeks or so to observe before starting their own fight club. Both fight clubs and LTGs have no curriculum other than reading the Bible regularly. LTGs do have a specific missional focus on “praying actively for the souls of lost friends, family, associates, and neighbors”⁷¹ while fight clubs believe non-Christians will come to know

⁶⁹ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 26.

⁷⁰ Neil Cole, “The Life Transformation Group System,” CMAResources.org, last modified May 19, 2009, accessed June 4, 2014, <https://www.cmaresources.org/article/ltg>.

⁷¹ Cole, *Organic Church*, 28.

Christ naturally through experiencing gospel-centered relationships in community—the result of a community with fight clubs at its center.

LTGs have a bit more structure and begin each gathering by asking one another the following ten questions:

1. Have you been a testimony this week to the greatness of Jesus Christ with both your words and actions?
2. Have you been exposed to sexually alluring material or allowed your mind to entertain inappropriate sexual thoughts about another person this week?
3. Have you lacked any integrity in your financial dealings this week, or coveted something that does not belong to you?
4. Have you been honoring, understanding, and generous in your important relationships this past week?
5. Have you damaged another person by your words, either behind his/her back or face-to-face?
6. Have you given in to an addictive behavior this week? Explain.
7. Have you continued to remain angry toward another?
8. Have you secretly wished for another's misfortune so that you might excel?
9. Did you finish your reading this week and hear from the Lord? What are you going to do about it?
10. Have you been completely honest with me?⁷²

These accountability questions provide a means of stimulating discussion and open sharing. LTG questions are reminiscent of John Wesley's small group questions from the eighteenth century.⁷³

⁷² Neil Cole, "Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups," CMAResources.org, last modified 1999, accessed June 4, 2014, <https://www.cmarresources.org/files/Cultivating-NeilCole-chap8.pdf>.

⁷³ For a full list see Appendix D, "John Wesley's 18th Century Small Group Meeting Questions."

1. Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
2. Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?
3. Do I confidentially pass onto another what was told me in confidence?
4. Am I a slave to dress, friends, work, or habits?
5. Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?
6. Did the Bible live in me today?
7. Do I give it time to speak to me every day?⁷⁴

John Wesley's Band Meeting Questions:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?⁷⁵

LTGs provide a purposeful small gathering to address sin in a focused way, study and apply Scripture, pray together for non-Christians, and ultimately help form followers of Jesus Christ.

Connecting and SoulTalk

“Connecting” and “SoulTalk,” two concepts shared by Crabb, point Christians to a different level of exchange applicable to any conversation including specific dialogue structures like fight clubs and LTGs. His concepts contain the transparency that Dodson and Cole mention. However, Crabb applies such transparency to a deeper level of impact, enabling the healing of wounds—addressing the brokenness and baggage that people carry into conversation. After years of practice as a psychologist, he makes a stirring

⁷⁴ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley's Class Meetings: a Model for Making Disciples* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 118-119.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.

statement that much of the healing in clinical practice could happen in regular conversations if believers “connected” on a deeper level in their daily lives.

Ordinary people have the power to change other people’s lives. . . . The power is found in connection, that profound meeting when the truest part of one soul meets the emptiest recesses in another and finds something there, when life passes from one to the other. When that happens, the giver is left more full than before and the receiver less terrified, eventually eager, to experience even deeper, more mutual connection. The power to meaningfully change lives depends not on advice, though counsel and rebuke play a part; not on insight, though self-awareness that disrupts complacency and points toward new understanding is important; but on connecting, on bringing two people into an experience of shared life.⁷⁶

Crabb delves below sinful actions and even the motives behind them, to address the fundamental state of “disconnection” of all humanity—separation from God, ourselves and others—pointing out that Christians have long believed this to be the fundamental broken human condition. “In less theological terms, disconnection can be regarded as a state of being, a condition of existence where *the deepest part of who we are is vibrantly attached to no one, where we are profoundly unknown and therefore experience neither the thrill of being believed in nor the joy of loving or being loved.*”⁷⁷ Conversations with connecting and SoulTalk directly address this disconnection.

Seasoned by years of providing counseling, Crabb wisely points out the need for individuals to sense connection upon self-exposure. Fighting sin happens best within the embrace of connecting. Crabb articulates an approach to help every Christian respond to the messy brokenness revealed by people rather than relegating and believing such issues as being best handled in the hands of a counselor. This approach correlates in the three

⁷⁶ Crabb, *Connecting*, 31.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

ways Crabb describes that God helps Christians become and help others become more like Christ:

First, He provides us a taste of Christ delighting in us—the essence of connection:

- Accepting who we are
- Envisioning who we could be

Second, He diligently searches within us for the good He has put there—an affirming exposure:

- Remaining calm when badness is visible
- Keeping confidence that goodness lies beneath

Third, He engagingly exposes what is bad and painful—a disruptive exposure:

- Claiming the special opportunities to reveal grace that the difficult content of our hearts provide⁷⁸

Crabb writes that to “whatever degree you offer these three ingredients, you will have a powerful impact on their lives.”⁷⁹ In every way it calls for proactive willingness to see and respond as Christ would, important both in the processes of becoming a disciple and making disciples. Fight clubs and LTGs echo the same heart—articulated by Crabb in such a way that provides helpful vocabulary and understanding of the process.

The approach articulated by Crabb calls Christians to enter into the pain of sin with others—quite countercultural to individualism. The normal tendency with a hurting friend, as he describes, “is to retreat, reprove, or refer. Like Israelites avoiding a leper, most of us want to establish a safe distance between us and the emotionally troubled.”⁸⁰ Connecting stands beside another, sharing their brokenness not from a distance but “with” them and “with God.” The following remarks paint a provoking image of what this could look like:

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10-11.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 25.

I suggest connecting, a kind of relating that goes far beyond affirming and encouraging, is needed. . . . When you see me filled with doubt and self-hatred, when you observe me during my worst seasons of discouragement and failure, I want you to be filled with both anguish (weep with me as I weep) and hope, not the empty hope that says trite things like “It’ll all work out” or “Just hang in there—I’m sure you’ll feel better soon,” but a hope that exists because it sees something in me that is absolutely terrific. . . . I want you to ache when you see the good buried beneath so much bad, but I want you to be passionately convinced that, by the grace of God, the good is there waiting to be released.⁸¹

From the connecting that Crabb speaks of emerges “SoulTalk” —what Crabb calls “the only *really* honest language.”⁸² “SoulTalk” speaks “whatever is truly alive in us into another . . . accepting whatever is truly alive in another when it is spoken into us.”⁸³ This contrasts with the “SelfTalk” people speak from birth—a language of “self-protection and self-sufficiency and self-absorption.”⁸⁴ Crabb provides a powerful question to examine one’s heart condition and readiness to connect:

Whether our words reach through the bad dynamics in another’s sinful heart and touch the holy appetites beneath depends largely on the answer to this: Are we so empowered by the gospel that we are disposed to continue believing in another’s miraculously granted goodness, and to therefore find delight in the other, no matter what degree of ugliness we encounter?⁸⁵

SoulTalk arises from the fight to see and respond to people as God does, releasing the good within them. The continual fight strives to “resist the bad (a process the Puritans called mortifying the flesh) and to release the good (what they called vivifying the

⁸¹ Ibid., 48-50.

⁸² Crabb, *SoulTalk*, 9.

⁸³ Ibid., 18.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 18-19.

⁸⁵ Crabb, *Connecting*, 70.

spirit).”⁸⁶ Like Dodson and Cole, Crabb acknowledges the fight and effort needed for each person to realize the fullness of who they are in Christ.

Crabb’s SoulTalk provides articulate frameworks to identify sin and fight it. Defining sin as “any effort to make life work without absolute dependence on God ... independence, a rebellion against God’s authority based on disbelief in His goodness, an independence that creates agendas for our lives that run directly counter to His,”⁸⁷ he provides four sinful agendas from Scripture that serve as a self-examination checklist:

1. Depending on your own resources to make life work
 2. Reducing the mystery of life to manageable strategies and following them
 3. Making it a priority to minimize personal risk
 4. Finding satisfaction wherever you can
- ... these passions provide an opportunity for false connecting, even among sincere believers.⁸⁸

This list and other information he provides serve as useful aids in learning to SoulTalk.

Crabb provides a challenging observation that anything done on a person’s own conveys SelfTalk and that whatever can be done only with the Spirit provides SoulTalk. Crabb mentions, “Every conversation either stimulates or dampens our desire for God.”⁸⁹

Through connecting and SoulTalk, Crabb describes with-God conversations that spark life in others.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 72.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 92.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁸⁹ Crabb, *SoulTalk*, 26.

Class Meeting

A fourth approach to with-God conversations comes from the eighteenth century—the “class meeting” that served as the core of the Methodist movement and is experiencing revival today. Watson emphasizes that out of the three primary small group types (affinity groups organized around common interests, information-driven groups focused on conveying information around a common curriculum, and transformation-driven groups focusing on changed lives)⁹⁰ the class meeting falls into the third category of transformation-driven groups; he calls them “the most effective at making disciples of Jesus Christ.”⁹¹ A class meeting “is a small group that is primarily focused on transformation and not information, where people learn how to interpret their entire lives through the lens of the gospel, build a vocabulary for giving voice to their experience of God, and grow in faith in Christ.”⁹²

Watson points out that curriculum-driven groups cause Christians to become more dependent on such prepared teaching. Provision of information proves counter-productive. “Instead of releasing Christians to love God and neighbor with their lives, curriculum often seems to make people feel less confident in their own ability to understand and respond to unexpected circumstance in their lives.”⁹³ Class meetings, like fight clubs and LTGs, focus on what Watson believes the Christian life primarily ought to stand on: not knowing the right things but living in Christ. In class meetings, participants

⁹⁰ Watson, 187, Kindle.

⁹¹ Ibid..

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 211, Kindle.

actively discuss their current relationship with God and “how they are living out (and sometimes failing to live out) their faith.”⁹⁴ Answering the weekly question of the quality of one’s relationship with God, class meetings provide a way for Christians to stay focused on growing as a follower of Jesus Christ. The meetings become groups of “honesty and personal accountability.”⁹⁵

The class meeting stems from John Wesley’s teachings in the eighteenth century. They formed an integral part of a Methodist’s faith. Wesley instructed, “Never omit meeting your Class or Band; never absent yourself from any public meeting. These are the very sinews of our Society; and whatever weakens, or tends to weaken, our regard for these, or our exactness in attending to them, strikes at the very root of our community.”⁹⁶ Wesley described this meeting as “a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”⁹⁷ At every meeting, each participant would answer the question “How is it with your soul?” These class meetings are considered the prime reason that Methodism exploded after the deaths of both George Whitefield and John Wesley:

From 1776 to 1850 American Methodism grew like a weed. In 1776, Methodists accounted for 2.5 percent of religious adherents in the colonies, the second smallest of the major denominations of that time. By 1850, Methodists comprised 34.2 percent of religious adherents in the United States, which was 14 percent

⁹⁴ Ibid., 227, Kindle.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 285, Kindle.

⁹⁶ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1766), 48.

⁹⁷ Robert W. Burtner and Rober E. Chiles, eds., *John Wesley’s Theology: A Collection from His Works* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1954), 258.

more than the next largest group. ... Throughout the period of this growth, every Methodist was expected to participate in a weekly class meeting.

A strong case can be made that the class meeting was the single most important factor to the growth of early Methodism and to the retention of converts within Methodism. People who had come to faith in Christ were immediately placed in a class meeting, where they would be helped to grow in their faith and where they would learn how to practice their faith.⁹⁸

John Wesley felt what the class meeting provided was so important that it became a requirement for membership in a Methodist society. “To be a Methodist meant that you were involved in a weekly class meeting.”⁹⁹ Class meetings also held people accountable to keeping the “General Rules” of doing no harm, doing good, and attending upon the ordinances of God.

Class meeting structure appears similar to the structure of fight clubs and LTGs. Groups meet weekly, add new members and may divide upon increased group size like LTGs, and address sin and the state of a person’s soul. Although Scripture would undoubtedly be referenced in examining the soul, reading it together does not serve as a primary part of the class meeting. In addition, class meetings usually have up to twelve people rather than a limit of two or three. Like fight clubs, LTGs and connecting, the class meeting pursues other-centeredness, focusing on helping one another move forward toward Christ through community. Love and dependence on one another drove the rigor of class meetings:

The phrase that best captures what the Methodists believed was so important ... was “watching over one another in love.” Early Methodists were asked to invite others into their lives and to be willing to enter deeply into the lives of other

⁹⁸ Watson, 367-374, Kindle.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 405, Kindle.

people so that together they would grow in grace. . . . they believed that they needed one another in order to persevere on this journey.¹⁰⁰

The decline of these class meetings parallels the decline of Methodism. They formed an essential part of people's growth.

Fight clubs, LTGs, connecting along with SoulTalk, and Class Meeting provide four current examples of "new" discipleship written about in the past ten years and incorporated into numerous churches. Their recent growth across the church in America testifies to the existing hunger among Christians for better discipleship. These four overlapping approaches to discipleship show a renewed emphasis in shaping fully formed Christ followers through the power of community, examination of sin, providing the gift of personal presence or connecting, study and application of Scripture, and partnership with the Holy Spirit. Discipleship today uses with-God conversations to turn people toward one another to ultimately move one another toward God.

Best Practices from Coaching for with-God Conversations

As a conversation-centered field, coaching offers rich resources to apply to with-God conversations. Because of the key role conversations play in forming disciples, this section looks at coaching-approaches to glean valuable insights that an individual can apply to dialogues. This relatively new field increasingly gains acceptance and credibility in business, leadership training, and other arenas. The International Coach Federation defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 422, Kindle.

that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”¹⁰¹ This process utilizes conversation to enable clients to realize core motives and delve deeper to move forward and “is chiefly about discovery, awareness, and choice. It is a way of effectively empowering people to find their own answers, encouraging and supporting them on the path as they continue to make important choices.”¹⁰² Christian coaching seeks to empower people to find their own answers and choices toward a slightly different aim. Individuals seek to discover God’s desires within their life journey as Gary Collins, Christian coach and counselor, writes:

At its core, Christian coaching is the practice of guiding and enabling individuals or groups to move from where they are to where God wants them to be. Human goals, dreams, aspirations, and gifts are not discounted, as these often come from God. But Christian coaches encourage others to find God’s vision for their lives and to move from following their own agendas to pursuing God's purposes.¹⁰³

Coaching serves as a perfect example of conversation where an individual (primarily) benefits through participation in dialogue with others, although the benefit often extends to the coach as well.

Coaching requires a conversational partnership. Coaches listen beyond words said or actions shown, remain client-centered, and move the client toward greater discovery through dialogue. The conversation also depends on the transparency of the client. The field of coaching, as a conversation-focused skillset, offers insight, understanding and

¹⁰¹ International Coaching Federation, “What is Coaching?,” International Coaching Federation Coaching FAQs, accessed July 21, 2014, <http://coachfederation.org/need/landing.cfm?ItemNumber=978&navItemNumber=567>.

¹⁰² Laura Whitworth et al, *Co-Active Coaching: New Skills for Coaching People Toward Success in Work and Life* (Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2007), xx.

¹⁰³ Gary R. Collins, *Christian Coaching: Helping Others Turn Potential into Reality* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 23.

appreciation of the conversational dynamics found in with-God dialogues. Its specific training in two key areas of listening and asking questions provides knowledge that will enhance the depth and impact of with-God conversations.

Listening

Every true conversation includes speaking as well as listening. Doug Pagitt, pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minnesota, remarks that evangelism in the Inventive Age will require listening not only to someone's words but also to the story he or she lives.¹⁰⁴ This requires effort since people often like to share what they know rather than seek to discover. Listening serves as an essential skill for with-God conversations. Jan Johnson, author and speaker on Christian spirituality, describes listening as the greatest form of the discipline of submission; it means quieting one's mind and being present to the other person.¹⁰⁵ The presence of one fully listening allows others to be the center of one's attention.

Listening well can make all the difference in the quality of a conversation and serves as an act of love, enabling the deeper connection that Crabb references. Although society may often define a person's value by the content contributed by a person, Bonhoeffer describes the different gospel way, "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Doug Pagitt, *Evangelism in the Inventive Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Sparkhouse Press, 2012), 68-69.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson.

¹⁰⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 97.

Bonhoeffer remarks that failure to listen will probably result in speaking “beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it.”¹⁰⁷ Good listening precedes good input into a conversation.

The coaching-approach helps a person improve in listening and makes the conversation more about the other person, a non-negotiable element of discipleship, and less about one’s contribution to the dialogue. Tony Stoltzfus, co-founder of a coaching training school and author of five coaching books, emphasizes how realization of another’s potential increases through listening: “The more you listen, the more you see how capable they are, how much they can do with a little encouragement, and what wonderful individuals they are.”¹⁰⁸ Listening well with a “learning” rather than “fixing” attitude helps uncover the true problem and best solutions. Stoltzfus instructs his trainees, “Don’t try to figure out the client’s problem—just listen! The client will tell you the answer. You just need to be listening intently enough to pick up on it.”¹⁰⁹ Often listening provides impetus for clients to solve their own problems by providing a safe space where they are heard.

Coaching teaches a kind of listening that silences internal dialogue carried into the conversation. More and more studies find that multitasking fundamentally cannot happen. The tendency to think of an answer before the other party finishes talking, come up with a solution to share, and think of errands one needs to accomplish that day—all of these

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁸ Tony Stoltzfus, *Coaching Questions: A Coach’s Guide to Asking Powerful Questions* (Virginia Beach, VA: Coach22 Bookstore, 2008), 8.

¹⁰⁹ Tony Stoltzfus, *Leadership Coaching: The Disciplines, Skills and Heart of a Christian Coach*, (Virginia Beach, VA, Coach22 Bookstore, 2005), 147.

pop-up dialogues in one's mind—impede good listening. The coach works to eliminate such internal dialogue and other potential distractions and commits to being fully present with the client in order to listen well. As such, Stoltzfus points out that this differs from counseling or prophetic ministry where one's discernment drives the process:

In coaching, you are attempting to draw out the client's own insight about what is going on. The client's discernment drives the process. You don't have to expend any energy trying to figure out what the client's problem is or how to solve it. God initiates the changes He wants and the Holy Spirit brings those things to the surface through teachable moments. The transformation of the client happens through experience and relationship, not the information you bring to the table.¹¹⁰

To do this, coaches remain interested, aim to listen well, and refrain from becoming what Stoltzfus calls “diagnostic.”

Coaches listen to more than words. They focus on “intuitive listening,” learning to be attentive to meaning and significance as defined by the client. Coaches pay careful attention to “resistance, fear, backtracking, and the voice of the Saboteur, who is there to object to change, point out the client's shortcomings, and bring up all the reasons why this idea, whatever it is, won't work The coach is listening for the nuance of hesitation, too, for the sour ring of something not quite true.”¹¹¹

Although not Christian, the authors of *Co-Active Coaching*, Laura Whitworth, Karen Kimsey-House, Henry Kimsey-House, and Phillip Sandahl, describe a kind of listening in coaching that runs quite parallel to the kind of listening involved in with-God conversations. In with-God conversations, Christians listen for lies of the enemy and seek to uncover truth. Coaches learn to listen at this level by practicing listening and practicing

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 157-158.

¹¹¹ Whitworth et al, 11.

paying attention to the client and others. Non-Christian coaching provides a portrait of the kind of other-centered powerful listening possible without even knowing the Holy Spirit and an enticing picture of how incredible listening can then be when in partnership with God.

Asking Questions

Good questions amplify listening and deepen conversations. In fact, Johnson notes that questions arise from listening well: “Good listeners ask good questions.”¹¹² Listening well naturally yields to questions from a desire to know more. Stoltzfus outlines five key reasons¹¹³ to ask instead of tell: “Questions have the power to change lives. They can jump-start creativity, change our perspective, empower us to believe in ourselves, push us to think things through or call us to action.”¹¹⁴ Questions present a nonthreatening demeanor and an invitation to dialogue, as they “strongly suggest that we are open to questions in return, which communicates that our desire is not to push our beliefs but to engage in dialogue.”¹¹⁵ Telling information can convey superiority creating resistance, whereas asking questions lowers communication barriers presenting a humble, learning posture.

Effective coaching hones the art of asking powerful questions. Questions can be good or bad, and there exists “a big difference between conventional questions that elicit

¹¹² Johnson.

¹¹³ See Appendix B, “Five Key Reasons to Ask Instead of Tell.”

¹¹⁴ Stoltzfus, *Coaching Questions*, 7.

¹¹⁵ Peel and Larimore, 173.

information and curious questions that evoke personal exploration.”¹¹⁶ Good questions emerge from curiosity—a genuine interest in knowing more. Direction guides curiosity: “Being curious in coaching is two things: not being attached to a particular path or destination and yet always being intentional about seeking out meaning, uncovering values, discovering learning for the client. It is not aimless meandering.”¹¹⁷ Coaching seeks to remain client-centered, choosing curiosity that benefits the client rather than satisfy one’s own interest.

Coaching stays away from closed questions—questions that an individual can answer with a “yes” or “no”—and focuses on open-ended questions—questions that an individual cannot answer with a “yes” or “no” and remain open to the client responding in any way he or she wants. Open questions allow the client to steer the conversation where he or she desires it to go. As such, he or she often reveals what really matters to the person.

Coaching stays away from leading questions or, as Stoltzfus calls them, “solution-oriented questions.” These questions generally frame suggestions or solutions originated by the coach in the form of a question: “Could you make more time for prayer in the morning?” “Would it help to set up a date night?” To make these questions better, “identify the problem that you originally had solved in your head and ask the client to solve it instead of giving the answer.”¹¹⁸ The above questions could be asked: “Where can you create space for God in your day?” “How could your relationship improve?”

¹¹⁶ Whitworth et al, 70.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 73.

¹¹⁸ Stoltzfus, *Leadership Coaching*, 186.

These non-judging questions help the client think through the situation and discover those realizations most needed or applicable.

The discipline of coaching encourages the client to speak for about 80 percent of the time and the coach for about 20 percent. Good questions provoke client thought and input and easily make this happen. By spending less time talking and more time focusing on listening and discovery, the coach listens more fully to the client. Coaching utilizes many types of questions and as coaches become adept at open-ended questions, they can move on to expanding their knowledge and ability to use other types of questions as tools to serve their client.

Through the study of listening and asking good questions, coaching offers important insight to developing two areas directly applicable to with-God conversations. Many people today hunger for substantial conversations that will reach past the mind and touch the heart and soul. People want others to see and hear them. Being a good student of listening and asking questions will sharpen a person's ability to be used as an effective life-giving conversational partner with the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Transforming everyday conversations into discipleship avenues has potential to resurrect the health of the church across America. Battling sin exists as an inevitable part of every Christian's life although growth happens. Engaging in with-God conversations serves as one vital way believers can enter the battle wisely. Day after day, people engage in multiple conversations: at work, at church, at the grocery store, in the parking lot, in the car, at home, on the phone, and with friends. These conversations touch lives at different faith and life stages and locations.

With every conversation that transforms into a with-God one, the opportunities for discipleship multiply. Programs confined to a specific time, format and location simply cannot touch the many lives conversations can touch. Discipleship must go beyond church programs affecting even conversations held in the parking lot after worship service and beyond. If even half of the everyday conversations held by Christians happened in partnership “with-God,” many thousands of lives could be brought closer to God. Practicing a habit of having with-God conversations will make this possibility a reality.

Living life with God even in daily conversations will require a reorientation to placing discipleship at the center of everyday life. The beginning of this project notes that isolation, hyper-individualism and a lack of correct theology mark unchurched and the church in America. With-God conversations address all three of these areas, providing authentic interest and relationship, a means to practice a life of serving others, and serving as space to work out theology by basing answers in Scripture. In doing so, followers of Christ will inevitably experience renewed passion as they experience the ability of the gospel to intersect, inform and ignite every section of life and faith in their life and the lives of others.

It is important to address a few elements pertaining to a lifestyle of with-God conversations. In a culture that often desires to mass produce success, Christians need to ensure that with-God conversations do not become just another “discipleship approach” achieved through listening and questioning techniques. Turning genuine conversations into a discipleship program will kill the life found in the organic questions and answers that emerge in everyday life. Second, love for God and others should fuel these

conversations rather than a sense of duty. The best conversations flow out of love and genuine interest. Third, discipleship takes time and intentionality that will often feel countercultural. To develop maturity in living life in dialogue with God and others, Christians will need to hone conversational skills such as listening and asking questions while talking less. Followers of Christ will need study Scripture in order to sift the many theologies in Christian society and seek the gospel, fighting to know and live by its truth. All throughout, they must fight the tendency toward individualistic culture and continually choose to open their lives to others—both to give and receive—with transparency and humility.

In the unbalanced discipleship found in many churches today, tipping toward personal growth, followers of Jesus need to recapture their responsibility and potential to impact the faith journeys of others. This communal dependence, recently rediscovered in the church, understands that best learning by the help of others. The Christian life continuously battles to realize and live out the truth of the identity purchased by Jesus through the cross. It cannot happen alone. Turning conversations into with-God conversations has the potential to stir new conversations of love that intersect gospel and real life. They can help restore the throbbing, pulsing vitality that ought to mark the body of Christ as believers walk *with* God and depend on His leading.

CHAPTER 4: DESCRIPTION OF FIELD PROJECT

Preparation of the Project

The field project initially began with the observation of CityVine Church dynamics, along with visits to other churches in New York City, Chicago, and Houston while researching current discipleship books and Scriptures in preparation for this project.

The original intention of the project involved gathering a focus group of six to eight individuals interested in growing skills in having with-God conversations. The group would experience and practice coaching in weekly meetings for six weeks, test their learning in daily life between meetings, and return to share their experiences and struggles. The end goal of the project sought to use the coach approach as a tool to help CityVine Church shift into a conversational culture of meaningful disciple-making dialogue. An increase in with-God conversations throughout daily life as a result of these sessions would point to success.

However, rather than a formal, organized process, the project has organically evolved into a genuine with-God journey. The coaching training I received in the AGTS D.Min. program, along with an accountability relationship, in addition to the research completed for the project have intertwined to naturally achieve the original goals. This chapter will demonstrate how CityVine, a small church plant consisting of approximately forty regular attendees, shifted from a program-driven discipleship approach to one based on conversation as the primary means for personal growth and helping others mature in

their relationship with God. Sharing this journey will reveal insights that will enable the same transition in other churches and relationships.

Observation of CityVine Church Dynamics and Context

In September 2011, I joined the leadership team of CityVine Church, a church planted in 2009 in New York's Lower East Side. Pastor Tim Harris led the church from September 2011 to August 2013 before Stephen Jo assumed the lead pastor position in September 2013. During these two years of transition from September 2011 to September 2013, Stephen was focused on finishing seminary and receiving more training from Pastor Harris. Under Pastor Harris's seasoned guidance and knowing the church's leadership would switch again in 2013, the church opted to maintain its existing programs and format to prevent drastic changes from harming the congregation.

From 2011-2013, CityVine Church's schedule and services followed a format similar to many contemporary churches. Sunday service and semester-based connect groups provided the two chief avenues of discipleship. In an effort to prevent church burnout, the rest of the week and calendar purposefully remained clear to ensure nothing else from the church competed with these two areas. Sundays followed a weekly pattern of two hours spent setting up equipment and chairs, followed by a ninety-minute worship service and then fellowship in the hall as various volunteers spent an hour tearing down the setup. The worship service usually followed a routine format: twenty minutes of praise, connection card fill out, a forty-five minute sermon, offering, and closing song. Sermon topics would follow a set topical theme with the exception of occasional guest speakers.

Connect groups met for two to three months with a month break in between semesters, and all groups followed the same curriculum—either a book or a church-created study on a book of the Bible with questions to be answered each week. The church encouraged groups to keep meetings from ninety minutes to two hours maximum; the average size of the group consisted of seven people.

During the first two years at CityVine, I observed a few areas stunting its growth. Individuals spent substantial time setting up and tearing down for each service, and most of those serving had little time for actual interaction with the rest of the church. Each Sunday, despite the considerable attention given to preparing the practical setup for the service, corporate prayer for the church and upcoming service consisted only of a few individuals who came to pray at 10:00 a.m. for five to ten minutes. The service rarely departed from the planned schedule. At least half the church attended connect groups and served on different ministry teams, generally consisting of longtime churchgoers whose conversations demonstrated “churchy” language and often stayed at a surface level. People shared opinions rather than referring to the Bible or gave personal advice and answers instead of engaging in dialogue. Over two years of personal observation, it became clear to me that those serving on teams and attending connect groups—essentially considered the church’s core leaders—did not demonstrate much growth in knowing God and loving others. Occasional midweek services for prayer, worship, or baptism yielded low turnouts of ten to fifteen people, usually those who faithfully served. People worked hard and regularly attended but failed to exhibit much growth. Instead of enthusiasm, church members often seemed tired, stuck, apathetic, or weary about their faith.

Preparation 1: Observation of Visited Church Dynamics

In preparation for this project, I visited Redeemer Presbyterian Church (downtown site) and Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City, D. L. Moody Church in Chicago, and First Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas, in order to observe church dynamics within large urban settings and to compare and contrast them with CityVine Church. I strived to pay specific attention to the general engagement during service, the type of conversations heard at the church, and what they revealed. All four churches were quite large and held several services each Sunday. The following table captures an overview on all five churches:

Table 1: Church Visit Observations

Church	# of People (est.)	Style of Service	Flow	Energy/ Enthusiasm Level	Conversations Before Service	Conversations After Service	Preaching Style	Church Discipleship Approach (as shown in literature or website)
CityVine Church (prior to Field Project)	40	Contemporary Songs and Service	Set—followed order of service and time schedule; Formal leading style	Low to Medium engagement	Low depth, catching up on weeks in the hallway, getting to know newcomers ¹	Low depth, catching up on weeks in the hallway, getting to know newcomers	Topical teaching style, practical application	Connect Groups, Sunday Service; Children with parents during praise
Redeemer Presbyterian Church Downtown (NYC)	600	Jazz Style Worship with Liturgy;	Set—followed order of service and time schedule, formal leading style	Low except during preaching	Not many, though many early arrivals	Low depth, 85% of the church left; those remaining chatted in fellowship area mostly catching up on week	Brilliantly intellectual, analytical, expository, practical application, directly applicable to NYC audience, lecture style	Sunday Service, Community Groups, Classes, Serving the Church/City/ Faith & Work; Children and adults have service separately
Brooklyn Tabernacle 9AM Service	4500	Pentecostal Worship with	Flexible—a choir song was stopped	Very high, interactive, energetic; at least 60%	Medium depth; a number of warm exchanges and	Medium to High depth; people had to leave to make room for	Expository, conversational, felt very	Sunday Service, Sunday Night Evangelistic Service, Tuesday

¹ The level of engagement and energy (rated by low, medium, high) in people's faces and demeanor along with the depth of content (also rated by low, medium, high) that was observed determined the rating for depth of conversation.

(NYC)		Gospel Choir	after it began by the pastor's wife in order to give space for an explanation, Conversational style of leading	arrived an hour before service start time	chats across the church	the next service but a few stayed talking in the halls or seats; seemed genuinely engaged	connected despite the large space; Pastor Cymbala paused to address the church in a very "fatherly" manner	Prayer Service, Foundation Bible Class (for Membership) Serving Ministries, Be Transformed Discovery Groups, Missions, Prayer; A few small children with parents during service—rest of children are in kids program
D.L. Moody Church (Chicago) Evening Service	100	Contemporary Songs and Service	Set—followed order of service and time schedule, formal leading style	Somewhat Engaged	Low to Medium depth; a few people chatted	Low to Medium depth; a few people stayed to talk and seemed to know each other well; most left	Expository teaching style with practical application	Sunday Service, Communities based on life season, Topical Learning classes, Serving Ministries, Missions; Children with parents in service
First Presbyterian Church 9:30AM service (Houston)	150	Traditional with Liturgy and Mix of Contemporary Songs and Hymns;	Set—followed order of service and time schedule, conversational style leading	Engaged	Low depth; people warmly greeted each other, no actual chatting	Medium to High depth; people had to leave to make room for the next service; people did seem to be taking time in the halls to chat further	Guest speaker, expository, practical	Gather (Services), Grow (Community Groups), Go (Serving, Missions); Children with parents in service

From these visits, three primary hypotheses² arose from the church visits: 1) conversations provide a gauge for effective discipleship; 2) engagement levels during the service provide a gauge for effectiveness in discipleship; and 3) worship service structure and style influences the formation of disciples.

Hypothesis A: Conversations Provide a Gauge for Effective Discipleship

The study of the Scriptures and general literature in chapters 2 and 3 have demonstrated that effective discipleship means growth in living life with God and seeking the same for others. Many visitors to CityVine have often commented on the friendliness

² The term "hypotheses" will be used in this paper as an "assumed proposition" based on the definition as follows - "a proposition, or set of propositions, set forth as an explanation for the occurrence of some specified group of phenomena, either asserted merely as a provisional conjecture to guide investigation (working hypothesis) or accepted as highly probable in the light of established facts."

of church members, and the hallway always buzzes with conversation for some time after Sunday's service. However, observation of these conversations for over two years has shown that the chatter often revolves around getting to know each other or sharing one's week. They typically do not engage in spiritual questions and faith. The number of conversations present therefore does not necessarily reflect a strong knit, growing community of Christ followers. Deborah Gill observes the need for something deeper than a welcoming environment: "People don't want a friendly church, they want friends."³ With-God conversations require "friends" who willingly go deeper into spiritual domains.

Visits to the four churches provided interesting observations. Overall, despite the sizes and ages of churches visited, conversations reflecting deep engagement seemed relatively low. Most observed conversations ended quickly and/or stayed on the topic of one's week. Overall, these exchanges seemed to happen in assigned times and places—in small groups or set fellowship areas, rather than all throughout the gathering of Christians. At CityVine, during the observation period, most conversations between church members happened before or after Sunday worship service or at connect groups. Little interaction happened between those times. Though relatively low overall, visited churches with more people engaged in deeper conversation also showed the highest level of engagement during the worship service. If this observation proved true, growth among CityVine members would impact conversations and vice versa.

³ Written correspondence to author, November 2, 2014.

*Hypothesis B: Engagement Levels During Services
Help Gauge Effective Discipleship*

The life of a healthy, growing follower of Christ demonstrates an increasing love for God and others. Thus, it follows that the engagement level of a worship service points to the effectiveness of the church in growing disciples. A love for God and others understandably translates to deeper interactions with others, warm exchanges, enthusiasm during worship and hearing of the Word, and all around active engagement in experiencing God during Sunday worship.

Observed engagement levels at CityVine and the visited four churches varied but most seemed fairly low. Engagement during worship service remained high throughout Brooklyn Tabernacle and First Presbyterian Church's services, and somewhat engaged at D. L. Moody Church. Enthusiasm levels during conversational times seemed much higher than worship service times at CityVine and Redeemer. From the entry door to the hallway after service, every area and aspect of the gatherings at Brooklyn Tabernacle and First Presbyterian carried a sense of energy that seemed lacking in the remaining three churches. Though the project does not have the luxury to further examine each church for more data to correlate engagement in church service with effective discipleship, CityVine Church definitely indicates a correlation between low disciple formation and low engagement in worship services. An effective project that stimulates growth in discipleship through conversation should reflect higher levels of engagement in the church service.

Hypothesis C: Worship Service Structure and Style Influence Formation of Disciples

It seems highly likely that the felt structure, flow, and style of leading the Sunday service serves as a public learning model for following Jesus to church attendees. Jesus modeled a lifestyle that flexed to the learning needs and situations He encountered, causing people to wrestle with their faith instead of living for God passively. Often church service formats can deliver prepared, controlled, one-way programs aiming for perfect execution rather than the creation of space allowing room for God to enter and engage the congregation's response in the moment. Of the five churches observed, only Brooklyn Tabernacle showed flexibility by breaking the planned service order. Despite—or rather because—of its large size, experience in ministry, and known excellence, Carol Cymbala, the senior pastor's wife and director of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, publicly stopped the musicians who had begun to play the offering song in order to provide time for Pastor Cymbala to properly introduce it. This, interestingly, felt natural rather than awkward as the church service carried a sense of responding to God throughout rather than commitment to structure.⁴ In the remaining four churches, church service followed an order delineated in a distributed bulletin. Several visits to Redeemer and regular attendance at CityVine Church revealed services that never deviated from planned format and time segments.

⁴ The morning choir practice demonstrates another way the church removes the sense of program. At Brooklyn Tabernacle, the choir practices before the 9AM service in the main sanctuary. Congregants are welcome to come early and enjoy the praise time and pray. The practice time felt more like witnessing worship than a watching a rehearsal. In most other churches, the worship team practices without being seen and then the service begins formally as the worship team assembles on the platform. Here the choir remained, sat, chatted, and greeted one another as everyone waited for the service start time. This gave a sense of authenticity and corporate equality, where everyone was waiting to worship God rather than church attendees waiting for a worship team.

Those leading Brooklyn Tabernacle and First Presbyterian Church did so in a conversational and spontaneous style that demonstrated response to God and people. The pastor, worship leader, and others speaking had a conversational style of leading in the way they spoke to people and introduced a song, prayer, statement, or message. The remaining three services at the other churches led people through each part of the planned service program with an emphasis on introducing each portion rather than engaging people.

The flexibility of the church service to respond to God's leading and people, as well as the manner in which those leading the worship service engage others, appears as two potentially important ways churches can influence discipleship from the platform. Rigid adherence to planned formats can translate to how people view God—viewing life with God as following inflexible expectations—rather than a relationship where God cares more about people and people care more about God than performance. A conversational leading style can help engage people and prevent dichotomy among disciples where leaders become categorized in a perceived higher spiritual tier. This hypothesis would prove true if change in CityVine's worship structure and style allowing greater flexibility and dialogue positively impacts discipleship.

Preparation Element 2: Coaching Training through AGTS's D.Min. Program

The three-year D.Min. Coaching Cohort at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary provided extensive information on coaching skills and tools along with practical training and experience revealing the incredible impact of high level listening and powerful questioning in a conversation. Coaching conversations demonstrated truly other-centered dialogues that heightened discovery, clarity, productivity, and forward

progress. Coaching training provided a whole new framework for conversations with others. Some of the indispensable learning included the study of the coach's view of clients. The International Coach Federation says coaches "honor the client as the expert in his or her life and work and believe every client is creative, resourceful and whole."⁵ The transformative experiences of being coached during the classes, along with coaching others and observing coaching, demonstrated how affirming, powerful, and different these conversations were from my daily conversations. Through three years of coaching assignments, coaching skills increasingly developed into a more natural part of my everyday dialogues with others. I learned to ask better questions and listen at a deeper level. The better results that emerged from doing so only increased my desire to continue in this direction and spontaneously began to impact conversations at CityVine Church with the leadership and church members.

Preparation Element 3: Accountability Relationship with CityVine Church Member

In November 2012, in fulfilling an assignment for the AGTS D.Min. class, "Renewing the Spiritual Leader," I had to find a consistent accountability partner willing to meet weekly for three months. Through prayer, I felt led to contact Elaine Tai,⁶ a CityVine Church member who had been attending since 2010. Elaine had been part of two connect groups I led. In those groups, the questions she asked and the way she prayed felt refreshingly honest. Though we both did not know each other very well, and though still wrestling with past experiences of church, she agreed to the commitment of

⁵ "What is Professional Coaching?" Coaching FAQs, accessed August 9, 2014, <http://coachfederation.org/need/landing.cfm?ItemNumber=978&navItemNumber=567>.

⁶ Name used with permission.

meeting me weekly for at least three months and answering accountability questions. This accountability continues today, albeit in a different form. The questions we agreed to answer each week were drawn from Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges's book *Lead like Jesus* and personalized to the areas we wanted to address.⁷

Neither Elaine nor I previously had been in such a committed, consistent accountability relationship. Meeting weekly for such dialogue proved transformational for both of us. Coming from different backgrounds—mine mainly various church ministries, hers the marketplace—proved to be an enriching experience. For Elaine, accountability provided an unexpectedly challenging yet helpful space for addressing a difficult personal situation and making new changes such as growing in confronting others in love. During an evaluation after six months of meeting together, she mentioned that setting action steps, a coaching skill, proved to be most helpful, as it keeps decisions from being just intentions. Elaine stated,

Accountability forced me to think through certain things earlier than I would have on my own. Because I don't like sharing less pleasant things, I had to work it out earlier with God, which accelerated the processing. It helped me understand that my actions impact others and that I need to ask God for all things. It's been authentic, miraculous, transformative, consistent, and structured. Recording our answers reminds me that God is talking to me and working in my life.⁸

For me, answering these weekly questions to someone who gave time, interest, and asked great questions, caused me to live more aware of God. I grew increasingly mindful of my shortcomings and current needed areas of growth. The answers from each week heightened my awareness of how I lived day to day. I grew in my own conversations with

⁷ Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Model of All Time* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2005), 185; See Appendix F, "Accountability Questions."

⁸ Shared with permission, recorded during an accountability session on July 21, 2013.

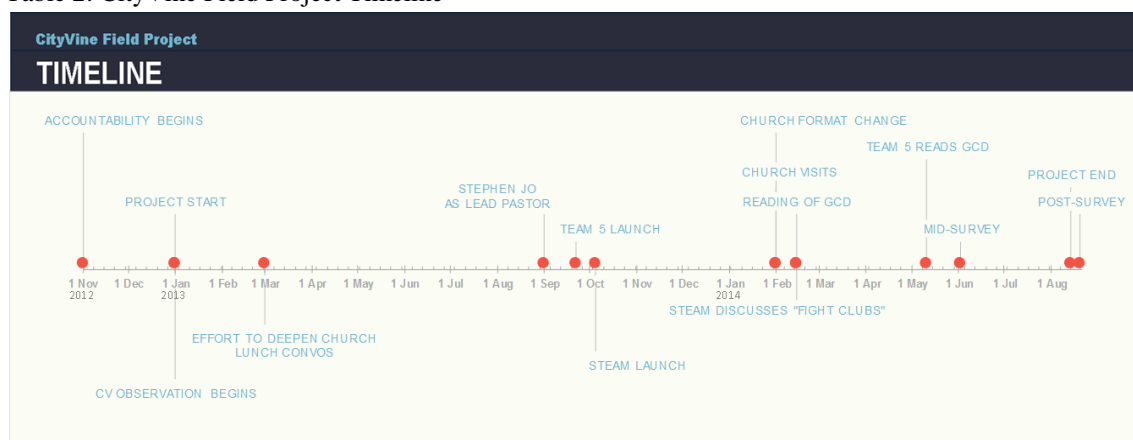
God from hearing the ways Elaine talked to God—in fresh, personal ways devoid of church jargon. Taking the step to meet weekly and face our sins caused both of us to grow in love and reliance upon the Holy Spirit, forcing us to gradually realize that our own wisdom could take us only so far.

The coaching training from AGTS informed these accountability sessions; we shared coaching skills and concepts, naturally incorporating them in a desire to help each other. Utilizing the coaching skills of asking powerful questions and listening prompted us to respond by inquiring further, helping each other move beyond difficult issues and towards greater discovery. Conversations grew intense at times as we pursued truth for one another and ourselves. Neither of us could escape by giving superficial answers and ignoring our struggles; we did not want to break our accountability covenant.

Execution of the Project

The execution of the project spanned eleven months as CityVine shifted from program-based discipleship to with-God conversational discipleship. This shift unfolded in an organic journey of discovery. Several stages took place: 1) efforts to have better conversations in hallway fellowship and at brunch after Sunday services; 2) the formation and conversations with two leadership groups, Team 5 and STeam; and 3) shifts in worship service format and approach. The general timeline for the field project can be seen below:

Table 2: CityVine Field Project Timeline



Stage 1: Efforts to Have Better Hallway and Brunch Conversations

After six months of growing in accountability dialogues with Elaine, the two of us began in early 2013 to experience increased dissatisfaction with the church routine and “churchy-ness”—language and responses that used Christian lingo but often conveyed very little. When we met CityVine members during setup time or in the hallway or brunch times after service, we asked open-ended questions to turn conversations deeper. Over the course of March to August, we would go to brunch with others in order to ask questions and facilitate conversation. These five months resulted in the regular routine of a number of church members frequently going to lunch together. Asking questions changed conversation dynamics. Pauses before answering increased as people needed time to consider their answers. Prior to this, conversations often filled with one-way sharing of events, work life, and constant chatter. Through effort, people began sharing their deeper thoughts and questions concerning the sermon and their faith struggles in the workplace or home; however, habits didn’t change. Despite all the conversations, Elaine and I often asked the questions, and people commented on their enjoyment of the dialogue but continued to answer instead of ask. The two of us experienced fatigue from

putting forth the effort of repeatedly asking with no return. Turning the conversation regularly felt like work.

Stage 2: Formation and Conversations with Two Leadership Groups

At the end of September 2013, Pastor Tim Harris transitioned out of the senior pastor role, and Pastor Stephen Jo became CityVine Church's lead pastor. Two main leadership groups formed: Team 5 and STeam. Team 5, named to reflect the age of the church (five years old), consisted of eight individuals with an invested commitment to building CityVine. This team initially met every two weeks for the purpose of planning and executing. STeam, shortened from Strategy Team, consisted of Stephen, Cara, Elaine (who joined from the second meeting), and me. Our purpose focused on thinking through strategies for plans discussed in Team 5. This team took on the function of church staff to prayerfully seek vision and future direction for the church.

Initial meetings of Team 5 and STeam tended to have the following characteristics: 1) the lead pastor spoke most, and meetings often consisted of his focus for the meeting and then a specific teaching; 2) topics for the meeting often dealt with logistics for service planning and church growth; 3) prayer, people's lives, and Scripture readings took up little or no time during the meetings. Both teams focused on defining the future for CityVine and identifying what kind of church we should be. Meetings seemed to go in circles as different ideas and opinions lacked unified clarity in what God desired.

In October 2013, at the first STeam meeting, we discussed the idea of coaching and the potential of incorporating questions into our meetings as a means of discipleship. We addressed what it meant to ask questions and described the effort the approach takes as each of us naturally prefer to tell more than ask. One person responded, "This could

make everything we do look so different.” We then spent some time exercising the idea by asking questions. STeam began to slowly incorporate asking questions at the Team 5 meetings from that point forward, as well as conversations during Sunday brunches. Throughout the year at both STeam and Team 5 meetings, I continued to intentionally respond through the coaching skills of listening and asking in an effort to draw dialogues deeper.

Team 5 and STeam meetings began to shift in character as people grew more comfortable with one another and held regular meeting times. Influenced by STeam discussions, Team 5 meeting conversations began to move away from focusing on plans to first seeking God. A leadership retreat in November 2013 provided time to get away together and form deeper friendships. The retreat also provided extended time to worship and pray together. As seeking God became the focus, conversation turned toward changing the worship service setup, stripping it of any program elements that impeded encountering God. The team realized that many of the regular attendees of CityVine served weekly, which prevented them from engaging in corporate worship during the service. Part of the low engagement level seemed to result from a focus on serving faithfully, an action which tended to disconnect Christians from their faith. The amount of time spent setting up and tearing down also hindered growth as a community as a third of regular attendees had no time to talk to newcomers or others.

During February 2014 at an STeam meeting, I shared a book from my research for writing chapter 3, causing an important shift in Team 5. The book *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* by Jonathan Dodson gave a framework for how CityVine could effectively use conversation to disciple others—fight clubs – where small committed groups of two

or three meet weekly to identify sin and apply Scripture. This idea provided the non-program approach for which we were looking. STeam's discussions of the book led to viewing Team 5 as a means to grow a core community that could launch fight clubs, weekly meetings held in order to "do life together." In the endeavor to live out commitment to one another and to the church's growth, the team began to meet every Monday. Because the eight individuals on the team lived in New Jersey, Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, and Long Island, these gatherings took extra effort, but meeting weekly at Stephen and Cara's home truly grew a deeper sense of community among CityVine's leaders.

In March 2014, one Team 5 gathering involved an intentional look at the coaching skills of asking open-ended questions. The team received a brief overview of how to ask questions by differentiating among kinds of questions: 1) closed-ended questions that could be answered with yes or no; 2) leading questions that convey that the asker already has an acceptable answer in mind; and 3) open-ended questions that seek greater discovery on behalf of the person being questioned. The team then divided by gender to allow individuals to share personally, practice listening, and ask questions. Focusing on open-ended questions helped most participants realize their tendency to turn statements into closed or leading questions; for others, the exercise revealed how unnatural it felt to form beneficial questions.

As more of the team championed the need for a greater understanding of the gospel and what following Jesus entails, they began to see the potential of fight-club-style conversations. This led to Team 5 reading *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* together in June. Team 5 meetings began to revolve more around the members of the group. Monday

gatherings would usually last three to four hours with conversations addressing anything that might come up as people shared their lives. Based on the fight-club model, STeam proactively sought to implement question-asking with Team 5 in an effort to address and discover the lies or misbeliefs behind non-gospel statements that were made during our conversations and to uncover the gospel truth that applied to the situation.

Stage 3: Shifts in Worship Service Format and Approach

Between December 2013 and January 2014, we planned to transition CityVine toward a service format and approach that would facilitate spiritual growth. We simplified the praise time to have only a worship leader on keyboard, to greatly decrease the amount of time spent setting up and tearing down; this released the worship and setup team to actually worship rather than lead. We hoped the simplified worship setup would encourage people to sing to God from their hearts rather than being moved by the musicality of a full team of instrumentalists and vocalists. The lights changed from colorful light filters to a couple of white spotlights to allow necessary light in the dark movie theater. We also minimized hallway setup and signage from a table full of pre- and post-service refreshments to coffee and water and no signage. We wanted to simplify every aspect of CityVine's Sunday experience to provide a straightforward experience of engaging God and each other in natural ways. The service format offered flexibility to allow people to commune with God and others, and respond to promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Simplification of the church service occurred in stages with the final format in place by the end of February 2014. Throughout the changes, we held question and answer sessions after service for four weeks. The questions and statements given at these

sessions by CityVine attendees revealed more of their spiritual walk than had our entire past year of Sunday fellowship. A few felt strongly that a full worship band was necessary to have an excellent service. Others didn't understand the point of stripping down food in the halls. The discussions illustrated how many of the church members missed the point of what the heart of Sunday service ought to be, holding onto form instead of function.

Results of the Project

The project affirmed the validity of the three hypotheses made during the preparation period.

Hypothesis A: Conversations Provide a Gauge for Effective Discipleship and Result 1: Shifting from Telling to Asking Has Increased Discipleship

Team 5 and STeam times together noticeably transformed. Changes in conversation led to changes in personal growth for each member, which then catalyzed new conversations with others. The conversations witnessed in August 2014 quite differed from those observed in February 2014. The lead pastor took less of the conversation time, and the majority of meetings consisted of dialogues over monologues. Everyone, especially STeam, asked more questions than stated answers. The comments of people provided an opportunity for growth as conversation allowed various viewpoints of the gospel to flourish in ways that a monologue would not allow. Engagement levels increased as individuals found more space for participation in conversation.

Through intentional with-God conversations, content and response within conversations deepened. The meetings allowed us to sift through perceptions of discipleship and dialogue about the next steps for the church rather than simply looking

for answers and opinions. Conversations within Team 5 and STeam grappled with personal sin as individuals began realizing that only through confession does a person realize his or her need of the gospel and appreciate the truth of God's Word. Individuals grew increasingly transparent as they shared personal struggles that revealed guilt and shame. In doing so, they encountered questions from others seeking to uncover believed lies and un-gospel motivations rather than people's judgments or statements. Long-time attendees of the church wrestling with the meaning of the gospel and their application of it characterized Monday gatherings. Conversations deepened, and truth flourished as the team experienced the gospel in action by learning to listen in love, ask questions through the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and seek the growth of others. Discipleship began to happen whenever the team gathered to converse—regardless of time or place.

In June 2014, after four months of weekly meetings, Team 5 took a mid-field research project survey to gauge where each team member stood in their understanding and participation in with-God conversations.⁹ The survey revealed the diversity of our team: some worked mainly with non-Christians, others mostly with Christians; broad definitions existed of a “satisfying” conversation as did the views of the conversational impact on personal growth as a follower of Christ. Interestingly, at this juncture, the entire team agreed that small talk or superficial conversations dissatisfied them, whereas initially they accepted such conversations as a part of everyday life.

⁹ See Appendix E, “Mid- and Post-Field Project Survey.”

Table 3: Mid- and Post-Field Research Project Survey Responses

Question	Mid-Field Research Project Survey Responses	Post-Field Research Project Survey Responses
# of conversations with Christians per week	Average 49% of conversations held by Team 5 were with Christians	
# of conversations with non-Christians per week	Average 51% of conversations held by Team 5 were with non-Christians	
What kind of conversations leave you energized/ satisfied?	<p>Those that did not require much effort, and both parties leave feeling it was enjoyable.</p> <p>Music topics.</p> <p>Gospel addressing my issues</p> <p>When struggles about child raising/real life situations are shared.</p> <p>What is happening in a week, people sharing how they and/or their family are doing.</p> <p>Deep thoughts, dialogue, real thoughts where we are, not trying to cover ourselves.</p> <p>When someone says something that the Holy Spirit uses to bring me “over the hill.”</p> <p>Where I feel heard.</p> <p>Where what I am really dealing with is shared and questions are asked.</p> <p>Where I feel I’ve been helpful.</p> <p>Where I learn new things that lead to new ideas.</p>	<p>Conversations where people share what they really think and we are able to connect and interact on a deeper level. Deeper and more meaningful ones.</p> <p>Majority of them; where “real” things were shared—honest feelings, root issues.</p> <p>Ones where both the person I’m talking to and I can feel safe and accepted in sharing honest things. At times, honest conversations leave me “burdened,” not because of the type of conversation but because of what is shared. It’s not easy getting into the mess of peoples’ lives (and my own mess!). But weirdly enough, those conversations can energize me at the same time.</p>
What kind of conversations leave you de-energized, dissatisfied?	<p>Boring details or superficial answers.</p> <p>Superficial—no real listening, bragging.</p> <p>Fake churchy ones where I didn’t feel any meaningful exchange took place.</p> <p>Ones where I only talked.</p> <p>Very little dialogue, none really.</p> <p>Small talk, where the whole conversation feels like small talk.</p>	<p>Surface level conversations where people say things they don’t necessarily believe in or mean.</p> <p>Small talk or critical talk, gossip.</p> <p>Talking about logistics.</p> <p>The most dissatisfying conversations are those that are surface level. I think there’s a time and place for everything under the sun, but small talk can only go on for so long. Continued small talk can also imply many things—fear of exposing the self, distrust, etc. I guess the exact opposite of the things that leave me satisfied!</p>
How have conversations with Christians affected your growth to becoming a full follower of Christ (whether for good or bad)?	<p>Without conversations following Christ would be impossible.</p> <p>Mostly positive—most conversations I learn indirectly from as I evaluate what was said, usually unexpectedly from not-so-positive comments that made me aware of something and pointed me to repent and grow.</p> <p>Some conversations refresh and</p>	<p>Conversations with Christians where I can ask real questions about them or share where I am/what I am wrestling with have been helpful in figuring things out with God.</p> <p>Conversations with Christians who just say “churchy” things and don’t seem to wrestle with things have been very triggering and bad.</p> <p>Easier when you have support from each</p>

	<p>refocus my mindset.</p> <p>Ones where the gospel is talked about.</p> <p>Conversations that are life giving or necessary rebuke.</p> <p>When a person models discipleship for me.</p> <p>When lies such as legalism or selfishness or blindness are spoken they demean me.</p> <p>By learning more of who God is and how to be with Him through other's experiences.</p> <p>They have helped me grow when people really listen and speak truth/life or share authentically of their story with God.</p>	<p>other.</p> <p>More challenging and rewarding in some ways as we share different experiences; conversations with other Christians help me to see more of what others are seeing. For instance, if a mature follower of Christ says "Wow, I'm learning what it means to love God." I shouldn't automatically assume that I know what this person is talking about. I should ask questions to see what this person is talking about so that I can grow from it. In addition, hearing what people struggle with and what is actually being communicated help me to see that I struggle with similar things.</p> <p>It humbles me to know I'm not better than anyone. It gives me a freedom to share my struggles with others. But it also causes me to desire to grow and be built more than to show myself to be a "good person" or a "strong follower of Christ."</p>
<p>How have conversations changed for you in the past six months? (6 months ago we began to meet weekly and then talked about <i>Gospel-Centered Discipleship</i> and other things)</p>	n/a	<p>Conversations with Team 5 have been more engaging for me, especially with Stephen and Cara asking more questions in our meetings.</p> <p>My conversations with people outside of Team 5 have not changed much in the last 6 months.</p> <p>They've become deeper and more meaningful.</p> <p>They've changed quite considerably.</p> <p>I notice myself asking a LOT more questions now. Question asking has become very normalized for me. I just realized this the other day! And I believe it is crucial to our discipleship as we aid people in self-discovery. I also try to get more meat out of conversations, noticing the moments where I back off due to discomfort or awkwardness.</p> <p>I'm noticing myself being more straightforward in my conversations, not needing to be surface-y all the time.</p> <p>These conversations make me aware of my need to be a better listener, hearing between the lines and discerning any lies people are believing.</p>
<p>When you think of your conversations this past week please rate them 1 (low/strongly disagree) to 5 (high/strongly agree):</p>		
<p>The conversations were interesting/engaging to me</p>	Average 3.33	Average 3.25
<p>Most of my</p>	Average 3.12	Average 4

conversations were with Christians		
Most of my conversations were with non-Christians	Average 3	Average 3.5
The conversations I had, on average, touched my heart	Average 2.83	Average 2.75
The conversations I had, on average this week, drew me closer to Jesus	Average 2.83	Average 3.25
My level of awareness of Holy Spirit being present in conversation	Average 3	Average 3.5
My attentiveness to Holy Spirit's leading during conversation	Average 3.25	Average 3.5
Total % of today's conversations that were responded to or attempted to respond to as Jesus would:	Average 34.3%	Average 49%

The answers in the survey along with responses shared during a closing celebration dinner demonstrated growth in engaging God within conversations and an emphasis placed on the importance of everyday conversations and growth in following Jesus overall. In August 2014, a post-field research project survey revealed the impact of having experienced—most for the first time—honest, with-God conversations.¹⁰ In all areas but two, an increase took place, with the overall average increasing from 34.3 to 49 percent, demonstrating that healthy change and discipleship occurred during these few months.

¹⁰ See Appendix H, “Post-Field Research Project Survey.”

Hypothesis B: Engagement Levels during Service Helps Gauge
Effective Discipleship and Result 2: More Dialogue in
Leadership Has Created More Dialogue in Service
Encouraging Increased Engagement

The conversations within Team 5 and STeam had a ripple effect upon the rest of the congregation, impacting the focus and style of Sunday teaching and conversations with the larger congregation. Growth in conversation has resulted in greater sensitivity against making things happen and creating space for people to come as they are. Greater enthusiasm for God and the faith journey has emerged with a shift toward increasingly engaging God in the shared moment together rather than during individually-led times. During the months of March to August 2014, a number of changes emerged in the Sunday service. As a result of Team 5 and STeam conversations, the lead pastor modified his preaching style to enable higher engagement through dialogue. Services occasionally incorporated spaces for dialogue to engage biblical text, times characterized more by questions than by answers. Over the course of six months, congregants have gradually felt more comfortable to speak, asking the questions they have and sharing deeper struggles with one another during the service.

Prayer time before service transformed from a brief formality to intensive intercession, listening for God, and sharing promptings of the Holy Spirit. These changes emerged as prayer moved away from being formally conducted by a leader to praying as the group felt led. During praise and worship, songs incorporate increased opportunities to allow worshipers to respond to God. People's voices can be heard, and the service has a more natural sense of flow and response to the Holy Spirit's movement. Overall, the congregation exhibits a higher level of enthusiasm for God and their faith journey. Interestingly, as people engage one another in deeper ways both during and after service

in the hallway, brunch after church has ceased as a weekly ritual and no longer provides the main place where people connect. Perhaps the organic with-God conversations that have emerged have begun to satisfy hunger for community.

Hypothesis C: Worship Service Structure and Style Influence
Formation of Disciples and Result 3: A Flexible Worship
Service and Style with Room to Dialogue
Facilitated Discipleship

The shift from program to welcoming dialogue has allowed people's voices to be heard in the corporate journey of faith, allowing leaders to see the actual state of CityVine's discipleship rather than assuming growth based on attendance. The congregation took a little over a month to adjust to hearing their own voices and engaging each other without feeling the need for energetic percussion beats. Over time, the changes have allowed for greater engagement and participation from the church than ever before. Church members have corporately heard more personal stories and struggles than before these changes; they now spend more time in prayer together and individually during service and hear more questions being voiced and receive more teaching on gospel-centered discipleship. The emphasis on dialogue over monologue in every gathering has created opportunities for people to voice the questions they have and wrestle with their faith and the text instead of simply receiving a teaching. Dialogue focuses on discovery, acknowledging the presence of the unknown. Increased appreciation of dialogue has allowed CityVine to also converse with the Holy Spirit and discover and respond to God instead of planning every detail.

The Project's Contribution to Ministry

As a result of the project, CityVine has a clearer understanding of discipleship. We now see discipleship as a journey of learning to live each moment with and for God, where each of us plays a key role through conversations that uncover lies and reveal gospel truth. Conversations provide critical personalized conduits for discipleship as each person struggles in his or her unique journey with God. The project also helped us understand the centrality of confession to a vital faith as recognition of sin points to the need for the gospel and the joy found therein. The necessity of fighting sin with the gospel has given our teams new appreciation of knowing the Scriptures.

Through this field research project, discipleship at CityVine has started to occur naturally through with-God conversation rather than a program, growing from Team 5 and STeam's journey to impact the rest of the church. The following statements from Team 5, rewarding and unprecedented in CityVine's history, reveal the new growth that happened as God led us into deeper discipleship through the beginning of a journey of conversations with Him and others:

- “A lot changed. I learned to practice vulnerability in front of people, saw more of the real me. I wasn't afraid because I was encouraged by others and their example to look at my real self.”
- (Referencing a time when the team focused on this particular individual asking question after question) “It didn't feel like an interrogation at all. It was something I wanted to share and finding honest answers wasn't difficult. Questions allowed me to go through steps, also dive into the Bible, find answers, question deeper. It went beyond being superficial—in connect group settings, you just say something, and there's no follow up. Everyone just nods.”
- (Through Team 5 conversations) “I'm learning how to love people beyond how I already love people—a deepening persistence in asking questions. Usually you stop when you sense tension but I'm learning to keep persisting; I don't want to be satisfied with that—want substance to come out. In our meetings, you begin to distinguish between lies and the gospel.”

- “When someone would share, it would make me think ‘I want more of that.’”
- “The few sessions we’ve gone through are not yet enough to start this (fight club). Conversations have always been more about encouraging—it’s never been about getting down to the root of the issue. I probably would not have gotten into these discussions if I could help it in the past. I’m finding it’s more fun, interesting than I thought it was going to be. It’s not random. It’s not using my own logic to convince someone. It comes down to the gospel—that center is different.”
- (In answer to what the person got out of Monday conversations) “I feel inadequate a lot. I’ve been in the church a lot. I feel like I should be praying a certain way, but if I try to do that, I’m not being myself ... Mondays got me into thinking about what does it mean to love Jesus. I was asked to think of a verse that shows what it means to love Jesus and the story of the woman washing Jesus’s feet came up ... I could never see myself in such a pure way. There would always be some sort of Pharisee in what I did; if it was me washing Jesus’s feet, there would be something for me involved in it. The conclusion I came to was it’s not the act of washing the feet. It’s really the Holy Spirit doing the work through you. If you just do it by yourself, it’s always lacking. If the Holy Spirit does it through you, it really is pure. It was really eye-opening. I do way too many things by my own logic and I don’t have enough relationship with the Holy Spirit.”
- “On Mondays, three hours passed by just like that. At connect group, I’m usually looking at my watch.”
- (Regarding one Monday evening where the team addressed the priority of intimacy with Jesus before “making” church happen, the question was asked “What’s getting in the way of you and Jesus?”) “That was one of the first times we shared more real things. I think I was glad because we were having real conversations about where we are... for a while we were talking about plans a lot but we weren’t talking about where we are with God. What I really wanted was for us to grow together.”
- (Referencing that same Monday as above) “I’m not used to revealing more ... I felt relieved because I finally shared with people I would most not likely share with. I put myself at risk (in sharing) ... I put trust in God as I understood that we were trying not to judge from our own view but more from a gospel-centered view. It was time.”
- “Through Team 5, I’ve been learning how to be with God in a community setting—be with God and other people. That was new for me, that church is a place where I could learn about God. Before, I couldn’t find God in church—could only find God outside the church with people I met elsewhere in a non-church setting (referencing parachurch gatherings). I didn’t think churches could have real conversations ... [Team 5 conversations] made me think ‘Hey, we could do this—have real convos—talk about things below surface level answers.’”

- “What I’m realizing with question asking is that it helps us realize our true state. Why not go there? Deal with what is there. One person might see what I don’t see, another sees something else. ... There’s a lot of nakedness, exposure, but unless we go there we can’t grow. ... I want us to want that more than to hide.”

Discipleship involves walking with Jesus in the real world,¹¹ becoming more like Him and leading others to walk with Him. Conversations often serve as the main avenues of communicating the gospel and provide poignant, daily available yet often overlooked spaces for life with God. They serve as powerful vehicles for change:

Transformation and conversation go hand-in-hand. ... Conversation makes possible self-awareness, meaning, self-opening, and altered perspective. Through conversation, people are knit together in relationship, giving birth to ideas, images, beauty, and vision. Conversation keeps the church and society in forward motion as it creates life-giving community and enables personal and social development. Conversation is a compelling means to influence the world. Conversation cultivates change.¹²

As this field project concluded in August 2014 with the end of Team 5’s commitment to a year of serving, conversations have unquestionably allowed discipleship to intersect people’s faith journey, revealing what they need to know of God. Sharing with-God conversations among members of Team 5 and STeam, delving into authentic and deeper places on our walks with God, and seeing a culture of transparency emerging has been a key highlight. Prior to this field project, Team 5 and STeam meetings centered on planning the logistics for building three community life hubs in the Lower East Side and Gramercy. The fruit of Team 5 and STeam meetings shifted our focus from project planning to first growing in life with God and meeting people in the moment. As a next step from this project, the teams had considered forming a Team 6, which would have the

¹¹ Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 22.

¹² Beverly C. Johnson-Miller, “Conversational Teaching and Christian Transformation,” *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 380.

same type of weekly meetings and discussions as the other teams; however, we realized we could do more. As a small church, we can now enlarge this to a weekly church-wide conversational journey, one based on the core culture of discipling one another through questions that stem from a “holy curiosity,” confession, and transparency.¹³

A new, affordable site is available and in the fall of 2014, CityVine will relocate to a room rented in an established church in the Lower East Side. This relocation allows us to have an office and regular accessible meeting space for the church. In moving to this venue, CityVine can open these weekly gatherings for anyone from CityVine who wishes to attend. Growth from this project has positioned us to build a church-wide culture that asks the deeper questions in love to one another, prompting fight club style conversations that uncover lies and truth. By continuing in these efforts, we hope to see CityVine grow as a church with a Christ-centered, loving, peer discipleship culture—a culture that seeks freedom and growth personally and for others through honest conversations.

Through this project, CityVine has realized the poignant potential of walking with God in daily dialogues for discipleship, creating a deeper understanding of what this project refers to as “with-God” conversations. With renewed emphasis on serving others, conversations become richer, more honest, dialogues spoken with the intention of another’s growth, and have the potential to be transformative experiences that touch the soul. As people grow in intimacy with God, their ability to hear and respond to the Holy Spirit will grow and enable more with-God conversations that impact both Christians and

¹³ Barna Group, “The Art of Spiritual Conversation in a Changing Culture,” Barna Q&A, last modified July 17, 2013, accessed July 24, 2014, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/621-the-art-of-spiritual-conversation-in-a-changing-culture#.U_gbIWPCedx.

non-Christians. The transformative potential of having such dialogues in every sector of society Christians are present is evident. Learning to have such conversations can cause, perhaps, one of the most pivotal changes to the face of discipleship across the American church today.

CHAPTER 5: PROJECT SUMMARY

This project focused on the significance, power, and potential of conversations as observed in the Scriptures, general literature, and in applied practice through a focus group of eight individuals at CityVine Church. This chapter evaluates the impact of this project, identifying key factors that contributed to project effectiveness and those that could have strengthened it. Implications realized through CityVine's participation in this project will also be reviewed along with a summary of recommendations, and topics for further study that may prove helpful for CityVine leadership and other churches seeking to further discipleship through conversations.

Evaluation of the Project

The project drastically redefined discipleship and its methods, altering the impact, focus, future, and culture of CityVine Church. The profound transformation that began over the course of a few months serves as a persuasive example of the potential conversations have upon discipleship.

Keys to Project Effectiveness

The time spent on this project provided clear examples of the differences and growth that emerged in followers of Christ who had engaged in with-God conversations. The presence of four key factors served as the essential elements for beginning an effective cultural shift away from program-based discipleship to one based in organic, personalized conversations at CityVine: 1) openness of leadership to exploring new

ideas; 2) the resources of coaching training and the book *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*; 3) the presence of natural curiosity, honesty, and love; and 4) the size of CityVine Church at this juncture.

Openness of Leadership to Explore New Ideas

This project would have been difficult and quite likely impossible to realize without the willingness of the lead pastor and the leadership teams of STeam and Team 5 to explore new ideas and engage in conversation. Though each person had personal ideals, sentiments, and experiences of church, no one held to the idea that tradition should persist, as long as the gospel remained uncompromised. Existing forms and rituals did not supersede discovery nor prevent the teams from exploring whatever would most encourage the church to encounter and grow in God. Each week's conversations demonstrated an overall willingness to engage, listen, ask, and answer with honesty.

Conversations initially began with more traditional views or a focus on current church planting strategies but willingly shifted from planning to addressing personal growth in intimacy with God and each other. The defensiveness that could have arisen from self-examination and questions rarely occurred. Over a number of conversations, STeam demonstrated openness to exploring coaching skills and asking questions instead of giving answers, which Team 5 responded to and slowly began participating in as well. The eight people forming Team 5 readily agreed to the sacrifice and commitment of meeting weekly, making building the church a priority. Throughout the project, this overall eagerness to explore and discover God's desire and work in CityVine created an environment that allowed changes and learning to happen. In particular, the open,

learning attitude of the lead pastor played a key role since reluctance to exploring new ideas would have capped any discussion.

Resources of Coaching Training and Gospel-Centered Discipleship

The three years of coaching training provided by AGTS afforded an excellent, in-depth, comprehensive learning experience that solidified newly learned skills into a lifestyle that I brought into CityVine interactions. Between classes, the extensive hours spent in peer coaching, observed coaching by a Professional Certified Coach, practice coaching others, and receiving mentor coaching from a hired professional coach created an intensive approach that provided learning opportunities at multiple levels. Peer coaching, where students coach and receive coaching from fellow classmates, modeled how people without former coaching skills could indeed learn and impact one another through conversations.

Working with a mentor coach created opportunities to experience and evaluate different coaching styles, coaching levels, and impact. In particular, the experienced differences in coaching from an ACC (Associate Certified Coach), PCC (Professional Certified Coach), and MCC (Master Certified Coach) level coaches illustrated how precise and powerful a thirty-minute conversation could become. Experiencing the impact of hundreds of hours of coaching, reading pages of material on coaching, and acquiring tools such as training in personality assessments, in addition to the experience of observing and receiving coaching, all combined to transition learning into a lifestyle of asking better questions, an approach I could use outside the classroom and coaching sessions. Coaching offered me more than a program; it profoundly impacted me and propelled me to implement coaching tools into everyday conversations with the CityVine

leadership team. The three years of learning provided confidence to ask better questions and share coaching with others, which dovetailed wonderfully with the next impactful resource: the book *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* by Jonathan Dodson.

This appropriately named book outlined a clear framework for the four members of STeam as to what gospel-centered discipleship looks like and the importance of confession to growing as a follower of Christ—characteristics program-based discipleship often lacks. Previously, CityVine leaders had talked about discipleship needing to incorporate an understanding of the gospel, but most of our ideas focused on classes and familiar formats that relied on one-way information relayed from a teacher or leader to others. *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* demonstrates how discipleship can expand from a narrow, top-down approach—one enabled only by a pastor or spiritual leader to lay people—to one defined as a journey every believer takes in responsibility for themselves and others. Learning to ask better questions as a team, listening, and identifying sin and truth helped our leadership move deeper towards fight-club style conversations and greater growth than previously experienced since the beginning of CityVine.

Presence of Natural Curiosity, Honesty, and Love

Prior to the project, Elaine Tai and I had made an effort to lead conversations deeper. This effort emerged first from dissatisfaction with the surface conversations often heard in our church and second, from wanting growth as a church in wrestling together with life and faith issues. We desired growth in our church such as the growth we had each experienced in our accountability times. Considering our personalities, however, both of us happen to be naturally curious, and we ask questions from a genuine desire to

better know people—how they think and see life—instead of purposefully using an approach on others. Even without coaching training, Elaine naturally asked great questions that provoked thought. The presence of two people with inquisitiveness and a habit of asking questions played an important part in influencing STeam and Team 5 to see and experience the impact of questions.

Honesty and love also played important factors in the project's success. The transparency and willingness of the eight people on STeam and Team 5 to truthfully answer questions greatly impacted the dialogues. The questions at times could have felt confrontational, but the team answered them in honesty, allowing for deeper discovery and growth as a team. As people shared personal stories, beliefs contrary to the gospel would emerge. Team members responded to these in love, asking questions without judgment to continue the dialogue and further conversation. Questions countered strong statements in the quest to understand rather than judge or retreat from rather difficult conversations. Except for a few rough encounters, participants extended grace and provided room for others to bring their unique personalities to the table. The more robust conversations happened because people could show their authentic selves and pursued better ways to converse and respond in love.

Size of CityVine Church at This Juncture

Although the dynamics of asking questions for discovery and growth as a disciple can begin with any group setting, involvement and buy-in of the senior pastor and leaders inevitably plays a critical role in shifting church culture. The transitional period of CityVine leadership in September 2013 that resulted in a new lead pastor provided a natural opportunity to discuss the future direction of the church. As leadership took this

occasion to reassess the health and needs of the church and talk through next steps, discussions showed a general openness to new ideas and direction.

The fact that CityVine Church consists of a small gathering of around forty individuals each week allows for changes to be implemented more easily. Meeting with people to share vision, explain upcoming changes, and provide question and answer periods after a Sunday service was understandably easier than if CityVine had to convince hundreds to change a set format and approach to discipleship. The small size of the church and transition period served as key factors to enabling the kind of growth and culture change among church leadership that ensued.

Keys to Project Improvement

Much of the project arose as an organic journey rather than an intentional process as originally planned. In hindsight, however, three areas would have strengthened the project: 1) increased time to practice listening and asking questions; 2) increased time to listen to the Holy Spirit and ask Him questions; and 3) more detailed assessments of each team member before, during, and after the project.

Increased Time to Practice Listening and Asking Questions

Though the purpose of the project sought to facilitate growth and discovery through coaching in an organic way rather than a led process, the one intentional session spent on reviewing and practicing different types of questions in dialogue proved helpful to the group. Through the session, the group realized that most questions they asked took the form of closed ended questions or were statements or opinions cloaked as questions. Individuals realized their own struggles in asking meaningful questions of others. Based

on this, more sessions spent intentionally developing listening and questioning skills would have likely developed stronger asking and listening skills sooner.

*Increased Time Practicing Attentiveness to the Holy Spirit
in Listening and Asking Questions*

The shift in STeam and Team 5 toward the normalization of deeper, authentic, transparent conversations has made a profound impact on the teams. Each person sincerely receives questions and answers candidly, and STeam has recognized the impact of questions. Discussions with STeam have increasingly made an effort to partner with the Holy Spirit in conversation, pausing to first listen to the Spirit's leading to see the other person through God's eyes, before responding. Team 5 has yet to make this transition as they still work to fully comprehend the potential of asking questions.

Reading *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* has helped bring Team 5 to recognize the need for confession and the practice generates a deeper appreciation of the gospel. Though time did not allow for more discussion, reading through Larry Crabb's books *SoulTalk* and *Connecting: Healing Ourselves and Our Relationships*, would have been helpful. Dodson's book provides content for gospel-centered conversations while Crabb's books provide insight into conducting life-giving conversations. Crabb's writings highlight the need to love others, a perspective that can only come from God, in a way that Dodson's book does not address. Spending time learning how to listen and discern the Holy Spirit's voice would provide an excellent next step as this would slow quick responses and allow better, wiser thoughts to emerge.

*Detailed Assessments of Each Team Member
Before, During, and After the Project*

Progress shows best when measured, and assessments of STeam and Team 5 members would have provided deeper understanding of the changes that occurred. The mid- and post-field research scale surveys along with the stated remarks demonstrate the shifts in views of discipleship, church, and conversation. In hindsight, however, it would have been tremendously useful if the team took a pre-survey in September 2013 although the project had not yet been fully formed. The changes that occurred would then have been even clearer. However, going forward, church leadership can continue to measure changes to see ongoing growth and compare it to the initial survey.

A more thorough assessment of each team member would also have enhanced understanding of the project's impact. Every team member comes from a unique cultural background and church experience. Taking the time to assess personality types, cultural and family backgrounds especially as they influence conversations, and church experiences would have provided a meaningful context for understanding each person's struggles with conversation and what could most help growth. When participants referred to their family backgrounds during conversation, it helped elicit better questions and understanding.

Implications of the Project

This project demonstrated a small but powerful example of the potential of conversations to grow authentic rather than religious followers of Christ. The core groups of STeam and Team 5 developed a new understanding of the gospel and the need for confession and community in ways previously unknown despite years of growing up in church. In reviewing the past year, four main realizations for CityVine emerged.

First, the project demonstrated that deeper conversations do not only emerge when people mature in Christ, they also facilitate growth and promote maturity. CityVine's ministry philosophy and perspective prior to the project prioritized teaching information for growth with the expectation that conversations would change afterward. The experience of this project proves otherwise: engaging others in with-God conversations provoked deeper thought, discovery, and growth in ways that information-based monologues simply did not. Witnessing such dialogue during and after worship service caused a ripple effect in what people speak about; they began to build a norm for such conversations to happen. Lies and misconstrued theology surfaced in ways that monologues did not allow, which then created opportunities to pursue truth in the gospel. Combining information and with-God conversations has promoted greater growth for CityVine members in a shorter period of time than the previous years spent providing connect groups and sermons. Without the disclosure found in honest with-God conversations, CityVine has realized that the appearance of growth can be quite misleading. Conversations serve as a necessary means to reveal where people actually stand in their faith journey.

Second, the project demonstrated that building and maintaining a church culture of with-God conversations takes persistent effort and encouragement from church leadership and others as such conversations prove to be countercultural. Though with some individuals such exchanges can happen easily, most dialogues require intentional effort and probably will continue to do so until the person embraces the culture. "Churchy" lingo, words heard and spoken so often in church that they have become a way of speaking without meaning, often characterizes conversations with long time

churchgoers. This lingo tends to cause long-time believers to always speak of strength instead of weakness, triumph over struggle. A sense of shame develops when believers are unable to live victoriously. In other words, it is false gospel living. In such exchanges, it takes effort, patience, and love to question and move believers to a deeper conversation to find the actual meaning of struggles. These conversations invite and model transparency. When people struggle to express themselves with new words and tend to keep content superficial, turning conversations deeper requires effort and a willingness to cross into personal territory in love to pursue truth and growth. Without effort and intentionality with-God conversations fail to happen. Interestingly, though it takes work to engage people in deeper conversations, these dialogues are met with enthusiasm and appreciation. Relationships where people can freely bring their real selves serve a genuine need in this individualistic, isolated, and disconnected city.

Third, the project revealed a need for church leadership to continually re-articulate the meaning of discipleship. Over the past year, conversations have helped the leadership realize the diversity of views on discipleship held by those attending CityVine. Often these views focus on the spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible reading, activities which may be out of habit, devoid of grappling with the gospel. Without realization, spirituality often intertwines with spiritual performance rather than intimacy with God. Since the project, CityVine continues to emphasize the true meaning of discipleship—a life that matures with God through identifying sin and lies and applying gospel truth personally and with others. Defining true discipleship once or even monthly has not been enough to cause a church-wide unified view of discipleship.

Lastly, the project points to the need for CityVine leadership to continue to grow by engaging in with-God conversations in order to provide healthy examples of discipleship. A common leadership principle states that leaders cannot take people where they themselves have not been, and this applies to the church. Honesty, transparency, gospel application, and with-God conversations have only begun to multiply to a few others. Responding out of love within a conversation through listening to the Holy Spirit takes continual practice and effort and needs to become a daily habit among leaders before they expect the habit from others.

This project has enabled CityVine Church leadership to realize the impact of conversations upon discipleship in profound new ways. The customized learning found in conversations that veers away from information-relay to the prompting of personal discovery provides a beautiful applicable way to engage the diverse, intelligent, individualistic people that fill the streets of New York City. We expect the growth seen in our small leadership focus group to proliferate and impact many others in the years to come.

Recommendations for CityVine Church

This project helped CityVine Church define discipleship and catalyzed a critical culture shift away from program-based discipleship toward spiritual growth through with-God conversations. With the change, leadership has grown more aware of each church member's intimacy with God and what struggles exist. They have gained a clearer sense of the health of the church and the teaching the congregation needs most.

Because with-God conversations are still forming at CityVine, opportunities exist for the leadership to cultivate the journey by implementing four recommendations: 1)

read Larry Crabb's books *Soul Talk and Connecting* and practice listening and asking questions in partnership with the Holy Spirit; 2) assess church members twice yearly to monitor the content of conversations and note changes; 3) find fresh ways to frequently communicate discipleship and the impact of with-God conversations; and 4) continue to intentionally examine CityVine to ensure we remain or improve as a place that allows and encourages conversations and questions.

CityVine leadership has unquestionably improved in their ability to engage others with thought-provoking questions and foster transparency. Still, the entire team needs to shed their predisposition to remain independent and strive to connect through life-giving SoulTalk as described by Larry Crabb. While many appreciate questions and the discoveries that benefit oneself, a tendency remains to avoid engaging others and connecting with their pain, struggles, and shame. While the team has learned to reveal their true selves, the next step is to become a church that loves God and others through seeing and remaining *with* others. Just as Dodson's *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* provides an articulate presentation of the need for confession and the gospel in discipleship, Crabb's works share a deeper understanding of the heart and presence of the Holy Spirit for genuine life-changing conversation.

Abilities improve with practice and listening, and asking questions consists of two important conversational skills that need honing. The difference between Master Certified Coaches (MCC) and Associate Certified Coaches (ACC) testifies to the kind of conversations that can result from practice. The difference arises from the level of experience held. MCC level coaches have at least 200 hours of coach-specific training as well as an extensive 2,500 (2,250 paid) hours of coaching experience while ACC level

coaches have 60 hours of coach-specific training and 100 (75 paid) hours of coaching. Continual intentional practice sessions for listening and asking questions would foster better discovery, especially as one practices listening for the perspective and leading of the Holy Spirit. Practicing would equip leaders and church members to hone their skills in a safe space and would help any relationship.

Measuring growth and progress requires assessment. As a church, taking the time to assess the growth of authentic followers of Christ will enable us to see the health of discipleship at CityVine. Church members could take either a brief scale-based survey similar to those filled out by STeam and Team 5, or leadership could keep an informal church member profile noting views of God and faith discussed in monthly conversations, sermon responses, and any special efforts made by the church to facilitate growth. Without measurement, discipleship may take place slowly, randomly, or with less impact than possible.

The congregation needs fresh exposure to discipleship and continual reminders about the importance of with-God conversations as vehicles for growth to keep them at the forefront of the life of the church. Communication experts emphasize repetition, and this holds especially true in the transient culture of New York City, which experiences a net domestic outflow yearly of more than 74,000 people and a net increase of more than 60,000 people through international migration.¹ CityVine continually sees newcomers arrive, remain a while, and then depart to new cities, coasts, and countries. Repetition will help remind existing and new church members of the priority of a life with God.

¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Dynamics of Population Change, New York City, 2010-2011," accessed September 6, 2014, http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/census/dynamics_pop.shtml.

Effective repetition, however, will also provide the church with fresh examples of the impact of with-God conversations and inspiring pictures of discipleship.

Sooner or later, churches tend to turn working ideas into programs or methods. CityVine leadership needs to continually examine themselves, their interactions, worship services, and time spent with church members to address any barriers to dialogue that have emerged. They need to continually safeguard against anything that has turned into unhealthily routine and work to preserve a safe space for questions and the opportunities for people to reveal themselves. Regular self-examination will help ensure that leaders do not fall into a habit of going through the motions of asking others questions but remain personally unengaged in genuine ways. When conversations feel like burdensome work that implies something needs to change. The focus should not simply aim for having with-God conversations but should strive to engage others in conversation with God. Application of these recommendations will strengthen the cultural shift that CityVine has begun to experience and will enable continued growth in living a fruitful life with God and others.

Recommendations for Future Study

A wealth of information from other fields exists on the potential of conversations. Gleaning ideas on this topic from other professions such as education and counseling would provide tremendous help in engaging in with-God dialogues. In recent years, educators have increasingly found value in embracing the ancient Socratic dialogue, realizing it creates the best context for learning and moves away from teacher to student monologues that emphasize memorization and regurgitation of teacher views.

From his extensive counseling experience, Crabb asserts that the kind of healing that happens in clinical counseling can also happen through truly connecting with others in conversation. The dialogical approach used in different counseling practices testifies to the power that dialogues have in addressing depression, schizophrenia, psychosis, and other issues. Open therapy sessions unplanned by the therapist, where patient and family participate in an open weekly dialogue, have shown the healing power of simply being heard and receiving response.² Powerful lessons can be learned by studying the findings in both fields. The fact that dialogue emerges as such a vital tool for learning, healing, and growth in multiple settings points strongly to God's design of humans as interdependent relational beings that need Him and others.

Visiting churches that have successfully implemented conversation as a key vehicle for discipleship would also enrich the learning experience. Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, Minnesota has their Sunday gatherings in a circle of couches where the sermon time takes the form of engaging the text through a dialogue with congregants. Visiting Dodson's City Life Church in Austin, Texas would provide experience of a church community built upon the concept of fight clubs. Each of these churches would probably reveal others on a similar journey. Further research into the experience and use of dialogue in counseling, education, and discipleship in churches today would provide important information and lessons learned that will only strengthen CityVine's approach to facilitating growth in following Christ through conversation.

² Jaako Seikkula, "Becoming Dialogical: Psychotherapy or a Way of Life?" *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 32, no. 3 (September 2011): 185.

Conclusion

For CityVine, this past year has truly provided a journey into the desert—taking us out of our plans and reliance upon experts and books, and teaching us to walk with God to discover what He values and wants to use in our church. CityVine’s leaders all attest today that church conversations, interactions with others, and their own spiritual walk have transformed. In each area, there exists greater examination of sin, engagement with the gospel, and a discontent in surface-conversations alone. As more church leaders understand and appreciate the impact of with-God conversations, dialogues across the church have begun to change.

Those in the STeam leadership team have become more sensitive to identifying and addressing the lies and false gospel heard in conversations around us. In the past six months, transparency in conversation inside and outside of worship services has revealed more genuine battles experienced by church members and thereby more opportunities to share and apply truth where needed. Within STeam with-God conversations have begun impacting family and work relationships in profound ways.

In a world full of broken homes and a city full of people connected yet lonely, with-God conversations have powerful implications for restoring relationships between people and between individuals and God. While much more learning remains, it seems clear that engaging in with-God conversations as a church community has started a lifelong, enriching journey that will take the church, and those she interacts with, closer to God’s original plan where human beings can experience no shame in being naked, fully exposed in God’s presence.

APPENDIX A: WITH-GOD CONVERSATIONS

My use of the term “with-God conversation” arose from attending the 2014 conference held by Renovaré, which emphasizes “life with God” as the first and primary of its eight core ideas. Founded in 1988 by Richard Foster, author of the classic *Celebration of Discipline*, and incorporating much of the work of Dallas Willard, the Renovaré community defines the “with-God life” as the aim of life, referencing Willard, that the aim of God is the establishment of a community with God present at its center.¹ The team of more than fifty people who spent five years preparing the *The Renovaré Life with God Spiritual Formation Bible* believe that “the unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life ‘with God’ as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus. We might call this the Immanuel Principle of life.”² Though the conference did not specifically refer to “with-God conversations” itself, it naturally follows to refer to kind of conversation in this way just as any other aspect of the “with-God” life can be referenced in this way. With-God conversations are those held with both Christians and non-Christians out of desire to partner with God to see and respond as Jesus would. Everyone involved draws closer to God as a result. “The supreme gift that anyone can give another is to help that person live life more aware of the presence of God.”³

¹ Foster, ed., *Life with God Bible*, 1.

² Ibid., 1, xxvii.

³ Benner, 17.

APPENDIX B: FIVE REASONS TO ASK INSTEAD OF TELL

All the Information is with the [PBC] “Person Being Coached”

Nobody knows more about you than you. Since all the memories of your life are stored in your head, you are the resident expert on you. So if you are, say, trying to improve your relationship with a co-worker, you can call up years of memories of working with that person, list what you’ve tried so far or what’s worked with others in the past, describe the organizational culture at your workplace, etc. The coach has none of that information. The PBC always knows far more about the situation than the coach.

Asking Creates Buy-In

Research shows (and experience confirms) that people are more motivated to carry out their own ideas and solutions. What that means is that a less-optimal solution the PBC develops often produces better results than the “right” answer coming from the coach. Asking creates buy-in, and buy-in gets results.

Asking Empowers

People often ask for coaching to help them make a major decision. But roughly 80% of the time, I find that they already know what to do: they just don’t have the confidence to step out and do it. Self-confidence is a huge factor in change. When you ask for people’s opinions and take them seriously, you are sending a powerful message: “You have great ideas. I believe in you. You can do this.” Just asking can empower people to do things they couldn’t do on their own.

Asking Develops Leadership Capacity

Leadership is the ability to take responsibility. ... Simply asking, “What could you do about that?” moves people away from depending on you for answers and toward taking leadership in the situation. Asking builds the responsibility muscle, and that develops leaders.

Asking Creates Authenticity

We all want to be known and loved. There is no better relational gift than to have someone see the real you and value it. The art of asking creates a bond between us and those we coach, because by asking we honor and value them. Taking the time to ask significant questions (and listen to the answers) communicates that we really want to know who they are at a deep level. This asking approach is the quickest way to build trust and transparency between people. And when we talk about the things our clients really care about, they make changes that are truly transformational.⁴

⁴ Tony Slotzofus, *Coaching Questions: A Coach's Guide to Powerful Asking Skills* (Virginia Beach, VA: Coach 22 Bookstore LLC, 2008), 9.

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS TO HELP DISCERN
UNGODLY MOTIVATIONS AND GET TO
GODLY MOTIVATIONS

(Questions 11 to 15 are taken from Sam Storm's book *A Sincere and Pure Devotion to Christ*)

1. What do you desire more than anything else?
2. What do you find yourself daydreaming or fantasizing about?
3. What lies do you subtly believe that undermine the truth of the gospel?
4. Are you astonished with the gospel?
5. Where have you made much of yourself and little of God?
6. Is technology interrupting your communion with God?
7. Is work a source of significance? How?
8. Where do your thoughts drift when you enter a social setting?
9. What fears keep you from resting in Christ?
10. What consumes your thoughts when you have alone time?¹
11. When people see how you spend money, do they conclude that God is a priceless treasure, exceedingly valuable above all worldly goods?

¹ Jonathan Dodson, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 155-156.

12. When people observe your relationship with others, are they alerted to the power of Christ's forgiveness of you that alone accounts for your forgiveness of them?
13. If you are complimented for some accomplishment, does the way you receive it drive onlookers to give thanks to the Lord?
14. Is your use of leisure time or devotion to a hobby or how you speak of your spouse the sort that persuades others that your heart is content with what God is for you in Christ?
15. Does your reaction to bad news produce in you doubt or fear, or does it inspire confidence to trust in God's providence?

APPENDIX D: JOHN WESLEY'S 18TH CENTURY

SMALL-GROUP-MEETING QUESTIONS

1. Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?
2. Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?
3. Do I confidentially pass onto another what was told me in confidence?
4. Am I a slave to dress, friends, work, or habits?
5. Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?
6. Did the Bible live in me today?
7. Do I give it time to speak to me every day?
8. Am I enjoying prayer?
9. When did I last speak to someone about my faith?
10. Do I pray about the money I spend?
11. Do I get to bed on time and get up on time?
12. Do I disobey God in anything?
13. Do I insist upon doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
14. Am I defeated in any part of my life?
15. Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy, or distrustful?
16. How do I spend my spare time?
17. Am I proud?
18. Do I thank God that I am not as other people, especially as the Pharisee who despised the publican?
19. Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold resentment toward, or disregard? If so, what am I going to do about it?
20. Do I grumble and complain constantly?
Is Christ real to me?

APPENDIX E: MICRO-DECISIONS OF FAITH¹

Table 4. Micro-Decisions of Faith

DISCIPLE	Choose to live by faith	+5	MULTIPLYING	<p>Speaks To: The Whole Person Addresses: Social Barriers To Overcome: Isolation By: Participation in the Body Goal Growth Answers: Will I live for Christ? Examples: Jerusalem Church (Acts 2:41-47) The Church at Antioch (Acts 11:19-26)</p>
	Choose to share faith	+4		
	Makes Christ-like choices	+3		
BELIEVER	Joins in community life	+2		
	Assimilates God's Word	+1		
	Trusts in Christ	0	HARVESTING	<p>Speaks To: The Will Addresses: Volitional Barriers To Overcome: Indecision & Unwillingness to Change By: Prayer & Persuasion Goal: Trust Christ Answers: Will I trust Christ? Examples: Paul before Agrippa (Acts 26:1-29)</p>
SEEKER	Turns from self-trust	-1		
	Sees Christ as the answer	-2		
	Recognizes spiritual need	-3		
SPECTATOR	Considers the truth of the gospel	-4	PLANTING	<p>Speaks To: The Mind Addresses: Intellectual Barriers To Overcome: Ignorance, Misconceptions & Error By: Presentation Goal: Understanding Answers: Who is Jesus? What does He want from us? Examples: Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-39)</p>
	Understands the implications	-5		
	Aware of the gospel	-6		
	Recognizes relevance of the Bible	-7		
SKEPTIC	Looks positively at the Bible	-8	CULTIVATING	<p>Speaks To: The Emotions Addresses: Emotional Barriers To Overcome: Denial, Indifference, Fear & Antagonism By: Your Presence Goal: Attraction, Trust You Answers: What's in it for me? Examples: Woman at the Well (John 4:4-30) Nicodemus (John 3:1-21) Matthew 13:1-23</p>
	Recognizes difference in the messenger	-9		
	Aware of the messenger	-		
CYNIC	Going his/her own way	10		
		11		
	Avoids the truth	-		
		12		

¹ William Carr Peel and Walter L. Larimore, *Going Public with Your Faith: Becoming a Spiritual Influence at Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 24.

APPENDIX F: ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTIONS

1. What are you most grateful for this week? Having the most difficulty with?
2. How is your current stewardship of finance?
3. Have you treated your family, peers, co-workers, supervisors, fellow CityVine members, as objects of God's love? Has God been the object of your love this week?
4. Have you missed an opportunity to give an apology or forgive someone? Have you avoided speaking truth to someone?
5. What sin has plagued you in your efforts to lead like Jesus since we met last?
6. Have you been intentional at inviting God into your work this week?
7. Have you kept your yes's and no's?
8. Have you been disciplined in exercise, eating healthy, and having quiet time with God?
9. Has your speech been encouraging and positive?
10. How are you reaching out collectively to your friends and community?
11. Have you lived for an Audience of One this week?
12. Have you lied in your answer to any of the above questions?
13. Prayer Requests/Action Steps

(Adapted from questions – p. 185 Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Model of All Time*)

APPENDIX G: MID-FIELD PROJECT SURVEY

Name: (can be left blank) _____

Date: _____

1. Average number of conversations you have per week: _____

of conversations with Christians: _____

of conversations with non-Christians: _____

2. What do you usually talk about with Christians? Non-Christians?

Christians:

Non-Christians:

3. What kind of conversations leave you satisfied/energized?

What kind of conversations leave you dissatisfied/de-energized?

What kind of conversations leave you feeling truly heard and seen?

4. How have conversations with Christians affected your growth (whether positive or negative) to becoming a fully formed follower of Christ?

5. Please rate your conversations from the past week, 1 (low/strongly disagree) to 5 (high/strongly agree) scale:

The conversations were interesting/engaging to me

1 2 3 4 5

Most of my conversations were with Christians

1 2 3 4 5

Most of my conversations were with non-Christians

1 2 3 4 5

The conversations I had, on average this week, drew me closer to Jesus

1 2 3 4 5

My level of awareness of Holy Spirit being present in conversation

1 2 3 4 5

My attentiveness to Holy Spirit's leading during conversation

1 2 3 4 5

6. Estimated number of conversations in which response was made or attempted to be made as Jesus would: _____

APPENDIX H: POST-FIELD PROJECT SURVEY

Name: (can be left blank) _____

Date: _____

1. **How have conversations changed for you in the past six months?** (Six months ago we began to meet weekly and then talked about Gospel-Centered Discipleship and other things.)
2. **What conversations leave you satisfied/energized?**
3. **What conversations leave you dissatisfied/de-energized?**
4. **How have conversations with Christians affected your growth to becoming a full follower of Christ (whether for good or bad)?**
5. **Please put a number for how doing life with God has improved or declined in the past 6 months** (-5 declined terribly, -1 declining somewhat, 0 no change, 1 a little growth, 5 tremendous growth): _____
6. **Please rate your conversations from the past week, 1 (low/strongly disagree) to 5 (high/strongly agree) scale:**
The conversations were interesting/engaging to me
1 2 3 4 5
Most of my conversations were with Christians
1 2 3 4 5
Most of my conversations were with non-Christians
1 2 3 4 5
The conversations I had, on average this week, drew me closer to Jesus
1 2 3 4 5
My level of awareness of Holy Spirit being present in conversation
1 2 3 4 5
My attentiveness to Holy Spirit's leading during conversation
1 2 3 4 5
7. **Total Estimated # of Conversations this past week:** _____
Total # of Conversations Responded or Made Effort to Respond as Jesus Would: _____

APPENDIX I: SALT DVD CURRICULUM



SALT DVD Curriculum: Creating Thirst by Greg Stier and Zane Black

Prepare students to create a spiritual thirst in their friends through relational spiritual conversations. Christians are called to make others aware of their own spiritual thirst so that they seek out the life-giving water of Jesus Christ, but sometimes the hardest thing about sharing the gospel is just getting started.

Salt Creating Thirst helps students overcome this barrier through engaging, thought-provoking videos that touch on universal issues and concerns. Additionally, this curriculum prepares and empowers them to step into authentic, give-and-take spiritual conversations enabling them to be salt with their friends.

Product Details

Format: DVD

ISBN: 9780985735241

Pub. Date: January 2014

Meet the Author

Greg Stier is founder and president of Dare 2 Share, a ministry committed to mobilizing teenagers to reach their generation for Christ.

Zane Black is a speaker and author who tours with Dare 2 Share and serves with Torchbearers International, challenging students around the world to go all in for Jesus.

Contents

Five 8- to 10-minute video sessions

Five *Salt* video clips to start conversations (high definition)

New gospel presentation video

Fully developed curricula (PDF and Word format)

Customizable presentation slides

36-page student workbook

Can be purchased at:

<http://gospelpublishing.com/store/startitem.cfm?item=261086&cat=YMYTHALIVE&mastercat=&path=YMYTHALIVE>

APPENDIX J: “SALTING”

An effective evangelistic conversational model used by Trinity Christian Center in Singapore is SALTING that can be equally as effective when used in discipleship conversations with anyone anywhere on the long faith spectrum from pre-believer to long-time believer:

- S Say Something
- A Ask a Question
- L Listen
- T Turn the Conversation to Something Deeper
- I Introduce Jesus
- N Note the Response
- G “Go for a Landing”

APPENDIX K: GUIDE TO THINK THROUGH REPENTANCE

“All of Life is Repentance” by Rev. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church
http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/All_of_Life_Is_Repentance-Keller.pdf

Martin Luther opened the Reformation by nailing the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. The very first of the theses was this: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ ... willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” On the surface this looks a little bleak! Luther seems to be saying Christians will never be making much progress. But of course that wasn’t Luther’s point at all. He was saying that repentance is the way we make progress in the Christian life. Indeed, pervasive, all-of- life-repentance is the best sign that we are growing deeply and rapidly into the character of Jesus.

The Transformation of Repentance

It is important to consider how the gospel affects and transforms the act of repentance. In “religion” the purpose of repentance is basically to keep God happy so He will continue to bless you and answer your prayers. This means that “religious repentance” is a) selfish, b) self-righteous, c) and bitter all the way to the bottom. But in the gospel the purpose of repentance is to repeatedly tap into the joy of our union with Christ in order to weaken our need to do anything contrary to God’s heart.

“Religious” Repentance is Selfish

In religion we only are sorry for sin because of its consequences to us. It will bring us punishment—and we want to avoid that. So we repent. But the gospel tells us that sin can’t ultimately bring us into condemnation (Rom 8:1). Its heinousness is therefore what it does to God—it displeases and dishonors Him. Thus in religion, repentance is self-centered; the gospel makes it God-centered. In religion we are mainly sorry for the consequences of sin, but in the gospel we are sorry for the sin itself. Furthermore, “religious” repentance is self-righteous. Repentance can easily become a form of “atoning” for the sin. Religious repentance often becomes a form of self-flagellation in which we convince God (and ourselves) that we are so truly miserable and regretful that we deserve to be forgiven. In the gospel, however, we know that Jesus suffered and was miserable for our sin. We do not have to make ourselves suffer in order to merit forgiveness. We simply receive the forgiveness earned by Christ. I John 1:8 says that God forgives us because he is “just.” That is a remarkable statement. It would be unjust of God to ever deny us forgiveness because Jesus earned our acceptance! In religion we earn our forgiveness with our repentance, but in the gospel we just receive it. Last, religious

repentance is “bitter all the way down.” In religion our only hope is to live a good enough life for God to bless us. Therefore every instance of sin and repentance is traumatic, unnatural, and horribly threatening. Only under great duress does a religious person admit they have sinned because their only hope is their moral goodness. But in the gospel the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit we are flawed (because we know we won’t be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness.) Our hope is in Christ’s righteousness, not our own, so it is not so traumatic to admit our weaknesses and lapses. In religion we repent less and less often. But the more accepted and loved in the gospel we feel the more and more often we will be repenting. And though of course there is always some bitterness in any repentance, in the gospel there is ultimately a sweetness. This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. The more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God’s grace appears to you. But on the other hand, the more aware you are of God’s grace and acceptance in Christ, the more you able you are to drop your denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions of your sin. The sin under all other sins is a lack of joy in Christ.

The Disciplines of Gospel-Repentance

If you clearly understand these two different ways to go about repentance, then (and only then!) you can profit greatly from a regular and exacting discipline of self-examination and repentance. I’ve found that the practices of the 18th century Methodist leaders George Whitefield and John Wesley have been helpful to me here. In a January 9, 1738 letter to a friend, George Whitefield laid out an order for regular repentance. (He ordinarily did his inventory at night.) He wrote: “God give me a deep humility and a burning love, a well-guided zeal and a single eye, and then let men and devils do their worst!” Here is one way to use this order in gospel-grounded repentance.

Deep Humility (vs. Pride)

Have I looked down on anyone? Have I been too stung by criticism? Have I felt snubbed and ignored?

- Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until I sense a) decreasing disdain (since I am a sinner too), b) decreasing pain over criticism (since I should not value human approval over God’s love.) In light of His grace I can let go of the need to keep up a good image—it is too great a burden and now unnecessary. Consider free grace until I experience grateful, restful joy.

Burning Love (vs. Indifference)

Have I spoken or thought unkindly of anyone? Am I justifying myself by caricaturing (in my mind) someone else? Have I been impatient and irritable? Have I been self-absorbed and indifferent and inattentive to people?

- Repent like this: consider the free grace of Jesus until there is a) no coldness or unkindness (think of the sacrificial love of Christ for you), b) no impatience (think of His patience with you), and c) no indifference. Consider free grace until I show warmth and affection. God was infinitely patient and attentive to me, out of grace.

Wise Courage (vs. Anxiety)

Have I avoided people or tasks that I know I should face? Have I been anxious and worried? Have I failed to be circumspect or have I been rash and impulsive?

- Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is a) no cowardly avoidance of hard things (since Jesus faced evil for me), b) no anxious or rash behavior (since Jesus' death proves God cares and will watch over me). It takes pride to be anxious—I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. Consider free grace until I experience calm thoughtfulness and strategic boldness.

Godly Motivations (a “Single Eye”)

Am I doing what I am doing for God's glory and the good of others or am I being driven by fears, need for approval, love of comfort and ease, need for control, hunger for acclaim and power, or the “fear of man?” Am I looking at anyone with envy? Am I giving in to any of even the first motions of lust or gluttony? Am I spending my time on urgent things rather than important things because of these inordinate desires?

Repent like this: How does Jesus provide for me what I am looking for in these other things? Pray: O Lord Jesus, make me happy enough in You to avoid sin and wise enough in You to avoid danger, that I may always do what is right in Your sight, in Your name I pray, Amen.

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