

RELATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP AS COUNTERCULTURAL CHRISTIANITY: A STUDY OF  
SCRIPTURE'S TEACHING ON RELATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP AS A RESPONSE TO  
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE

BY

BENJAMIN J. BERGER

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PASTOR JON BARE, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WISCONSIN

MARCH 8, 2019

## ABSTRACT

Scripture describes a disciple of Christ as one who follows Jesus in faith born of the gospel – that is, a “believer” or a “Christian.” Correspondingly, discipleship is every activity by which the Holy Spirit nurtures the new life of the believer. Scripture does not prescribe specific methods of discipleship, but rather teaches that the Holy Spirit disciplines Christians through the Word of God – through the message of law which convicts and cuts, and through the message of grace which comforts and heals. In addition to the church’s public preaching and teaching of this message through its called workers, Scripture instructs all Christians, as members of the body of Christ, to build one another up in faith as they apply God’s Word to each other – a concept I term “relational discipleship.” Such relational discipleship is rooted in Christian community and grounded on three scriptural principles: all Christians are priests of God, the body of Christ exercises mutual care and concern among its members, and relational discipleship grows as the Christian is nurtured in faith. Contemporary American culture, however, is highly individualistic, tends toward compartmentalizing faith, is increasingly embracing digitally-mediated relationships in place of more personal and genuine connection, and promotes a consumeristic attitude toward faith and the Christian community. In this paper, I demonstrate how these cultural characteristics present obstacles to the formation of Christian relationships and the exercise of relational discipleship. I further demonstrate how Christian leaders can mitigate the impact of these cultural barriers by implementing the scriptural principles of relational discipleship through small groups.

## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
PART 1: WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?.....	5
The Scriptural Concept of Discipleship	5
Discipleship: An Analysis of Popular Contemporary Views	7
Discipleship in Lutheran Theology	12
PART 2: RELATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP IN THE SCRIPTURES .....	17
Principle 1: Every Christian is a Priest of God	17
Principle 2: The Members of Christ’s Body Express Mutual Care and Concern	19
Principle 3: Relational Discipleship Grows from a Nurtured Faith	21
Relational Discipleship in Action	24
PART 3: THE CHURCH AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE.....	27
Individualism	29
Compartmentalization	34
Digitally-Mediated Relationships	38
Consumerism	42
Closing Thoughts on Cultural Influence	47
PART 4: A PRINCIPLED RESPONSE .....	49
A Definition of Small Group	51
Embracing the Priesthood of All Believers	52
Facilitating Mutual Concern	55
Nurturing Christians for Relational Discipleship	59
CONCLUSION.....	64
APPENDIX 1. SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE .....	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	70

## INTRODUCTION

On June 3rd, 2018, millions of people across the United Kingdom sat down for a meal. People who had previously passed each other by on their busy way to work gathered together. Neighbors paused their hurried schedules to talk with one another. People who shared the same neighborhood or community – but had never met – learned about one another. This was planned. This was intentional. This was the Big Lunch.<sup>1</sup>

The Big Lunch is an initiative of the Eden Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to building stronger communities in the United Kingdom. The initiative began in 2009 with 750,000 participants and has since grown to over six million people annually.<sup>2</sup> The idea is simple: once a year, neighbors and communities share a meal together with the goal of strengthening relationships. The Eden Project website summarizes the event as a few hours when “cars stop, shyness stops, gloom lifts and the UK comes together in the street to meet, greet, share, swap, sing, play and laugh for no reason other than that we all need to.”<sup>3</sup> Research on the 2018 event claims various positive outcomes, including facilitating millions of new friendships, reducing loneliness, building closer relationships with neighbors, and bringing people of different generations and ethnicities together.<sup>4</sup>

---

1. “The Big Impact | Eden Project Communities,” n.d., <https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/the-big-impact>.

2. “The Big Impact | Eden Project Communities.”

3. “About,” *Eden Project Communities*, 31 October 2016, <https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/about>.

4. “The Big Impact | Eden Project Communities.”

In the project organizers' own words, the Big Lunch is "a growing movement of ordinary people choosing to make connections and positive changes in their communities."<sup>5</sup> But it is also something more: it is a lesson in taking purposeful, intentional action to counteract a culture that values individualism, privacy, and self-fulfillment.<sup>6</sup> It is a lesson in reshaping culture. And as such, it is a lesson for the contemporary church as it pursues countercultural Christian community.

Scripture beautifully describes the church as the body of Christ. The Apostle Paul says: "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph 4:16 NIV). Christ calls his followers to serve one another (John 13:12-17), to rejoice together (Rom 12:15), to bear each other's burdens (Gal 6:2), and to love one another as he has loved them (John 15:12). This care and concern finds expression in many and varied ways – including in mutual admonition and edification with the Word of God. Christians are to see their relationships with other Christians – whether at home, church, work, school, or in the community – as avenues for building one another up in the faith (1 Thess 5:11). Christian relationships, Scripture teaches, are avenues for growing in the grace of God through the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Christian relationships, Scripture reveals, are avenues for *relational discipleship* – the building-up of the body of Christ, Christian to Christian.

And yet the practice of such relational discipleship faces significant challenges today. Certainly, the fallen nature within the Christian rebels against Scripture's direction to edify the body of Christ. But the obstacles to relational discipleship come from *without* as well – from the values of the world and the patterns and habits of living embodied in culture. Many of the same

---

5. "The Big Impact | Eden Project Communities."

6. "Country Comparison - UK," *Hofstede Insights*, n.d., <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/the-uk/>.

cultural forces that work against community more broadly present obstacles to community within the church as well – and similarly require a purposeful, intentional response. In this paper, I will demonstrate that individualism, compartmentalization, digitally-mediated relationships, and consumerism have become barriers to relational discipleship among American Christians. Furthermore, I will show how Christian leaders can mitigate the impact of these cultural barriers by implementing the scriptural principles of relational discipleship through small groups.

I begin by exploring the concept of discipleship, discussing the scriptural sense of the term, popular contemporary views, and the Lutheran perspective. In the second part of the paper, I outline the following three scriptural principles for practicing relational discipleship: all believers in Christ are members of the universal priesthood, the members of the body of Christ practice mutual care and concern, and relational discipleship grows from a nurtured faith. In part three I transition to a discussion of contemporary culture, demonstrating the prevalence of individualism, compartmentalization, digitally-mediated relationships, and consumerism in American society and the impact of these cultural characteristics on the practice of relational discipleship. Finally, I close the paper by using the example of small groups to demonstrate how Christian leaders can mitigate the impact of contemporary culture as they embrace Scripture's principles for relational discipleship.

My research methodology synthesizes secondary sources and original research. I rely primarily on the expertise of published authors to demonstrate the influence of the above-mentioned cultural characteristics on the American church. To illustrate the role of small groups in counteracting these cultural influences, I present original research on five Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) congregations gathered through questionnaires and by interview: Bethlehem, Lakeville, MN (questionnaire responses by Pastor Matt Ewart);

Crosswalk, Phoenix, AZ (questionnaire responses by Pastor Dan Solofra); Immanuel, Greenville, WI (questionnaire responses by Pastor John Qualmann); St. Marcus, Milwaukee, WI (questionnaire responses by Pastor James Hein); and St. Mark, De Pere, WI (interview with Pastor Ben Workentine). I selected these churches based on their reputations for established small group programs. A sample questionnaire is included in Appendix 1; the interview with Pastor Ben Workentine followed the same format.

## PART 1: WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

In this first part of the paper, I will establish an understanding of “disciple” and “discipleship,” beginning with a survey of how the New Testament employs these terms. I will then move on to analyze popular contemporary views of discipleship from a Lutheran perspective. I will close this section by tracing the concept of discipleship in Lutheran theology, noting especially the prominent role of law and gospel.

### **The Scriptural Concept of Discipleship**

Throughout the gospels, μαθητής denotes someone who learns from another. Matthew 5:1 notes that Jesus spoke the Sermon on the Mount to his *disciples*: “His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” In John 8:31 Jesus says to the Jews, “If you hold to my teaching, you are truly my disciples.” The gospels similarly speak of the disciples of John the Baptist (Matt 9:14), the disciples of the Pharisees (Matt 22:16), and the disciples of Moses (John 9:28) to designate those who learned from their respective teachers. BDAG reflects this core aspect of μαθητής by defining the term as “one who engages in learning through instruction from another, *pupil*, *apprentice* [italics in original].”<sup>7</sup> However, this instruction was more than simply academic study or the honing of skills and techniques, such as in a trade. A disciple was one whose core attitudes and outlook on life were shaped by the one he or she followed. Moon comments: “In the world

---

7. William Arndt and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609.



of the Old and New Testaments, this learning was not an academic exercise; rather, learning was achieved by following a rabbi. . . . In the midst of this relational discipleship, the worldview assumptions of the disciples were transformed.”<sup>8</sup>

The gospels frequently speak of this transformational aspect of discipleship. In Luke 6:40 Jesus says to his followers: “The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained *will be like their teacher* [italics added].” Jesus commits the making of such disciples – those whose *lives* are shaped by Christ’s teaching – to his church at the close of Matthew’s gospel: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20). Disciples of Christ do not simply learn from him – they *follow* him, they *become like* him in a way that’s observable to others: “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:8).

The heart and soul of Christian discipleship, however, is not merely knowledge or learning, not only outward obedience and conformity, but rather an inward change of the heart, an intimate connection with Christ as Savior. As Jesus gathered his disciples, he proclaimed to them: “The kingdom of God has come near. *Repent and believe* [italics added] the good news!” (Mark 1:15). In response to the Pharisees who criticized Jesus for calling a tax collector as a disciple, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but *sinner to repentance* [italics added]” (Luke 5:30-32). And in his commission to the New Testament church, Jesus commanded, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing* [italics added] them.” Through faith in Christ effected by the gospel, disciples are intimately connected with Christ – not merely as a rabbi, but as Savior. Jesus speaks

---

8. W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 46.

beautifully of this new relationship in Matthew 12:38, where he says of his disciples: “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” And again on Maundy Thursday, Jesus says to the eleven: “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5) and “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (John 15:9). More than simply a transformed life, Christian discipleship is a transformed relationship with God in Christ. Consequently, the Scriptures apply the term “disciple” to all those who are connected by faith to Christ, to all those who believe and trust in Christ as their Savior – including children (Matt 10:42).

Jesus’s call for followers, for disciples, was a call to repentance and faith in him. Christian discipleship, therefore, can refer to one’s status of being a disciple – a person connected by faith to Christ as Savior. Often, however, the term discipleship describes the efforts or actions which nurture the Christian life. From this perspective, discipleship is the *ongoing process* of nurturing Christian faith and living. In this paper, I primarily employ this latter meaning.

### **Discipleship: An Analysis of Popular Contemporary Views**

The term “discipleship” conveys a variety of goals and methods within contemporary Christian circles. In his discussion of discipleship among Lutheran churches, Mattes summarizes current efforts under two broad categories: one which emphasizes personally conforming to Christ, and the other which focuses on social transformation.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the first, Mattes comments, “One type copies the neo-revivalist tactics of North American Evangelicals. It anchors discipleship in a unique experience of God in worship and serves then as the basis for specific practices designed

---

9. Mark C. Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” *Lutheran Q.* 26.2 (2012): 142.

to move ‘nominal’ members of the church into more disciplined lives of faith.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, this concept of discipleship places primary emphasis on imitating and conforming to Christ in attitudes and actions (i.e., sanctified living). This approach commonly focuses on *measurable* improvement and may embrace a specific form or process intended to produce the desired results. “In this paradigm for renewal,” remarks Mattes, “if specific marks of discipleship are encouraged, then one can expect greater commitment to the church – moving the church from an oasis of members to a strip mall of discipleship.”<sup>11</sup> Moon describes discipleship in similar terms, emphasizing the active redirecting of one’s life toward Christ: “Discipleship anticipates the barriers in the path ahead and helps move the disciple in the direction of Christ in order to overcome these barriers.”<sup>12</sup> Such a view of discipleship hears Christ’s call for unequivocal commitment to the Savior and a willingness to suffer all for him (Luke 14:26-27) and responds with standards to measure one’s progress and status as a disciple.

A popular example of discipleship that embraces specific practices with the goal of measurable change is “apprenticeship” or “multiplication evangelism.” This form of discipleship is akin to mentoring in which one Christian personally discipled another with the goal of ever greater maturity in faith and Christian living. Coleman proposes eight principles to guide this sort of discipleship, drawn from his observations of Christ’s approach to ministry: selection (discipling a limited number of Christians), association (persistent and close fellowship between the teacher and the disciple), consecration (requiring obedience to God’s will), impartation (giving oneself to the discipled as Christ did), demonstration (modeling Christian faith and

---

10. Mark C Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” *Lutheran Q.* 26.2 (2012): 142–163.

11. Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” 151.

12. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 49.

living), delegation (empowering the disciple for work in the kingdom), supervision (ongoing guidance), and reproduction (the disciple becomes the teacher and begins the process anew).<sup>13</sup> Eims similarly discusses “discipleship training” and promotes three principles based on Christ’s method of working with his disciples: selection, association, and instruction.<sup>14</sup> And Hanks and Shell suggest the following three elements for successful multiplication evangelism: equipping teachable members to minister; teaching them to similarly empower others (the principle of multiplication); and developing a world-wide vision, wherein disciple-makers see themselves in God’s larger plan “for world conquest.”<sup>15</sup> Proponents view such approaches to discipleship as a return to the biblical model and to a strategy that “surpasses programs and passing fads, and one that has its roots in the Scriptures.”<sup>16</sup>

Processes designed to function as a scaffold to aid spiritual growth and discipleship certainly may have some practical wisdom and indeed may reflect scriptural principles. As Coleman’s principles suggest, it certainly is important to invest time and effort into other Christians when seeking to nurture them in their Christian faith and life. Additionally, one-on-one mentoring has scriptural precedent (e.g., Paul’s mentorship of Timothy and Titus) and can be quite effective for training up leaders within the church. However, such approaches may also lead to an overemphasis on *method*, seeking to produce by the correct process what only the Holy Spirit can effect through the means of grace, and could – as Mattes notes – result in “an inherently two-tiered hierarchy between those who are the disciples versus those who are mere

---

13. Robert E Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Spire, 2010).

14. Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978).

15. Billie Hanks and William A Shell, *Discipleship: The Best Writings from the Most Experienced Disciple Makers* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1981), 12.

16. Hanks and Shell, *Discipleship*, 12.

members, rather than seeing all the church as disciples.”<sup>17</sup> Such an overemphasis on systems and processes inevitably leads to overstatements and ultimatums, such as Barna’s claim: “Until the church recognizes that people grow most effectively when coached or mentored by one or two fellow sojourners who are one or two stops ahead of them on the journey, rather than by just listening to more teaching from highly educated expositors, people’s spiritual development will be stunted.”<sup>18</sup> Hanks and Shell similarly assert, “As pastors and laypeople personally experience an equipping lifestyle, they develop an almost infectious commitment to training faithful men and women. When this occurs, the church become [*sic*] revitalized.”<sup>19</sup> And Coleman likewise champions the principle of reproduction as the golden ticket to thriving discipleship: “By this strategy the conquest of the world was only a matter of time and [the disciples’] faithfulness to [Christ’s] plan.”<sup>20</sup> Such contemporary opinions are not dissimilar to Charles Finney’s efforts at revivalism in nineteenth century America, which promised that “if [Christians] did the right thing, revival would come.”<sup>21</sup>

Mattes notes that the second popular view of discipleship today shares similarities with social gospel and has as its objective world transformation rather than church renewal. “It conceives discipleship in terms of progressive social agendas, sees ‘moral deliberation’ [i.e., ethical evaluations] as the dominant purpose of congregational life, and views the public witness

---

17. Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” 153.

18. George Barna, *America at the Crossroads: Explosive Trends Shaping America’s Future and What You Can Do about It* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2016), 69.

19. Hanks and Shell, *Discipleship*, 12–13.

20. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 99.

21. “Charles Grandison Finney & the Second Phase of the Second Great Awakening,” *Christian History / Learn the History of Christianity & the Church*, 1989, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-23/charles-grandison-finney-second-phase-of-second-great.html>.

of the church primarily in terms of social and political action.”<sup>22</sup> While concerns such as proper stewardship of the environment and meeting the daily needs of one’s community are certainly scripturally sound and God-pleasing, this perspective on discipleship emphasizes the radical transformation of society at the expense of the gospel’s heart and soul – the forgiveness of sins in Christ. As Mattes summarizes, this approach holds that “the church is an instrument by which to create genuine moral community on earth” and focuses on “moral transformation, the promise of an ideal community.”<sup>23</sup> As a result, God’s message of law and gospel is diminished in favor of popular ethical issues. Horton comments: “[T]he call to radical transformation of society can easily distract faith’s gaze from Christ and focus it on ourselves,” making the church into “something more than the place where God humbles himself, serving sinners with his redeeming grace.”<sup>24</sup>

The popular views of discipleship discussed above tend to deemphasize the Holy Spirit’s ordinary work through the means of grace, relying instead on experience, process, or the promise of radical transformation as the driving force. They overemphasize outcomes and as a result run the risk of creating tiers between those considered merely *Christians* and those who are *disciples of Christ*. Scripture, on the other hand, teaches that the disciple of Christ is one who by faith lives in Christ, who is both sinner and saint, and whose life in Christ and growth in faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit through the gospel in Word and sacrament. In the following section, I will demonstrate how Lutheran teaching has consistently emphasized this understanding of the Christian life.

---

22. Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” 142.

23. Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” 154.

24. Michael Scott Horton, *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 155.

### **Discipleship in Lutheran Theology**

Kolb observes that the terms “disciple” and “discipleship” were not widely used in Lutheran literature until perhaps the 20<sup>th</sup> century when German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer popularized the vocabulary among Lutherans.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, discipleship was of paramount importance to Luther, and was indeed essential to the Christian faith and life. Kolb summarizes:

Some in our day may protest that ‘believer’ is something less than a disciple.... But Luther, Melancthon, their students, and their students’ students believed that if you trusted in the Lord above all that he had made, you would do what the logic of faith makes inevitable: those who have been buried with Christ and raised with him walk in his footsteps.<sup>26</sup>

At the heart of Lutheran discipleship is the Christian’s relationship to God fostered by the means of grace. Indeed, Kolb notes that Luther viewed discipleship as “a life of trust in the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, who is a God of conversation and community, a life which proceeds from God’s address to his human creatures in his Word, in all its several forms.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Mattes highlights that Lutheran discipleship “is more properly viewed as something God does to believers” through the application of his law and gospel.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, daily contrition and repentance worked by God’s law and gospel lies at the heart of the Christian life and discipleship. Clearly such was Luther’s view expressed in the first of his 95 theses: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said Poenitentiam agite, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.”<sup>29</sup> As Kolb notes, Luther understood such repentance as a “daily

---

25. Robert Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition,” *Concordia Theology*, 26 March 2012, <https://concordiatheology.org/2012/03/discipleship-in-the-lutheran-tradition/>.

26. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

27. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

28. Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” 142.

29. Martin Luther, *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences: October 31, 1517*, Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1996).

dying through the surrender of sinfulness to the buried Christ and the daily resurrection to a new life defined at its core by trust in the one in whose footsteps faith dares to follow.”<sup>30</sup> The central role of God’s Word in working “a daily return in repentance and faith to God” stands in opposition to the legalistic tendency of reducing discipleship to a program for spiritual growth.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Mattes goes so far as to assert that “[d]iscipleship which conceives of the Christian life as continuous growth via learning through trial and error is an inappropriate category to apply to Luther’s theology. There is no progress to speak of in the Christian life, but instead... only a continuous oscillation between the accusing law and the comforting gospel” – that is, the Christian disciple remains both sinner and saint in this life.<sup>32</sup> It is with a similar emphasis on the consistent application of law and gospel that Michael Horton questions the drive for revivalism in churches today, a drive which complements popular discipleship’s emphasis on radical transformation over and above all else:

Is the intense longing for revival itself part of the problem, fueling the feverish expectation for The Next Big Thing? Is it not remarkable enough that Jesus Christ himself is speaking to us whenever his Word is preached each week? . . . And is it not sufficient that those who belong to Christ are growing in the grace and knowledge of his Word, strengthened in their faith by the regular administration of the Supper, common fellowship in doctrine, prayer, and praise, guided by elders and served by deacons?<sup>33</sup>

Kolb identifies two other important aspects of Luther’s view of discipleship: the communication of the Word of God, and the arenas wherein Christians live as disciples of Christ (vocation).<sup>34</sup> The Reformers, Kolb comments, understood the role of various forms of media in

---

30. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

31. Mark C Mattes, “Properly Distinguishing Law and Gospel as the Pastor’s Calling,” *Logia* 24.1 (2015): 37–46.

32. Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” 145.

33. Horton, *Ordinary*, 80.

34. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”



communicating God’s Word to the people. Although the Reformation emphasized the sermon as the primary tool for forming Christian hearts and lives, the Reformers also valued written materials and the mutual edification of Christ’s body outside of corporate worship. Kolb summarizes:

Lutherans have always lived from what was said and what was read. Sermons, absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another live from and foster the reading of the Word in Scripture and every other form of Christian literature as the agents by which repentance and faith are created and new obedience finds its forms.<sup>35</sup>

Notably, Lutheran teaching has recognized the less formal role of such “mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another” as an important element of Christian discipleship, with family life as a primary avenue for such mutual edification. Graham comments, “Another of Luther’s important insights was of family life itself as the ‘*ecclesia domestica*’, serving as a bridge between the worshipping community and public vocation.”<sup>36</sup> Amsdorf shared Luther’s perspective, considering parents to be their children’s primary teachers and essential to the pastor’s effective preaching.<sup>37</sup> Amsdorf believed that “public preaching was having little effect in converting men and leading them to better lives because the common people, particularly the young, were just letting the message go in one ear and out the other” and therefore Amsdorf emphasized the role of the father instructing his household.<sup>38</sup> Horton summarizes, “[The Reformers] knew that, as central as it was, the public ministry was weekly, and it needed to be

---

35. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

36. Elaine Graham, “Luther’s Legacy: Rethinking the Theology of Lay Discipleship 500 Years after the Reformation,” *Ecclesiology* 13.3 (2017): 324–348.

37. Robert Kolb, “Parents Should Explain the Sermon: Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent,” *Lutheran Q.* 25.3 (1973): 231–240.

38. Kolb, “Parents Should Explain the Sermon: Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent,” 235–36.

supplemented and supported by daily habits.”<sup>39</sup> This emphasis on the role of parents in teaching their children has persisted throughout the history of Lutheranism and remains a concern today: “[W]e need to place more emphasis upon the urgent necessity of study of the faith-nourishing and faith-strengthening Word on the part of the individual in his own private life as well as in home and family life.”<sup>40</sup>

The role of mutual Christian edification is closely related to the second aspect of Lutheran discipleship which Kolb highlights – vocation. In opposition to the medieval placement of sacred activities over and above all else, Luther emphasized that everything a Christian does in faith as part of his ordinary life is God-pleasing. Kolb comments: “To provide clues for living out this life Luther concluded his Small Catechism with instructions for daily meditation on God’s Word and prayer and a table of succinct pointers on how to live within the structure of God’s ordained situations according to his callings and commands.”<sup>41</sup> Luther’s successors continued to emphasize this “everydayness” of Lutheran discipleship as well: “In sermons and devotional literature the successors of the Wittenberg reformers continued to present God’s structure for daily life in terms of his calling his people into specific vocations in home, economic life, society, and congregation.”<sup>42</sup> Living out one’s ordinary, everyday life as a Christian therefore becomes the standard of faithfulness. Horton comments: “Regardless of the role or place in society to which God has assigned us by our calling, we are content. Our identity

---

39. Horton, *Ordinary*, 181.

40. E.L. Wilson, *The Abiding Word*, ed. Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1953), 1:207.

41. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

42. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

is already determined by our being ‘in Christ,’ not by our accomplishments. The measure of excellence is daily love for our neighbors during this time between Christ’s two advents.”<sup>43</sup>

This biblical and distinctively Lutheran view of discipleship centers on the Christian’s relationship with God fostered through the daily cutting of God’s law and healing of his gospel. And yet, similar to the apprenticeship approach to discipling, the Lutheran view also recognizes a *communal* aspect – the role of individual Christians in applying law and gospel in one another’s lives, in addition to the preaching and teaching proper of the congregation. As Graham notes, “Christian discipleship and vocation are not simply individual, personal or private, but spring from being ‘incorporated’ into a community, into the body of Christ, the people of God.”<sup>44</sup> In the next section, I will further investigate and describe Scripture’s teaching on this communal aspect of Christian discipleship.

---

43. Horton, *Ordinary*, 161.

44. Graham, “Luther’s Legacy: Rethinking the Theology of Lay Discipleship 500 Years after the Reformation,” 328.

## PART 2: RELATIONAL DISCIPLESHIP IN THE SCRIPTURES

One need only examine the occurrence of “one another” in the New Testament to see that Scripture places a high priority on Christian relationships. God desires that his children love another (John 13:34,35), serve one another (Gal 5:13), do good to one another (Gal 6:9,10), and care for one another (1 John 3:16-18). Perhaps the highest expression of such love and care among Christians is relational discipleship – that is, the mutual admonishment and edification among Christians as they apply the Word of God to one another’s lives. In the following paragraphs, I identify the biblical basis for such relational discipleship by suggesting three principles which summarize Scripture’s teaching. I conclude this section with a look at relational discipleship in action as these principles are applied in the Christian life.

### **Principle 1: Every Christian is a Priest of God**

Called ministers of the gospel, in whatever form their ministry takes, are God’s gift to his church. Such men and women have a unique, public calling from God to serve a specific role in the church. The apostle Paul has this narrow definition of a called worker in mind when he writes to the Ephesian Christians: “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11).

By contrast, God has called all believers in Christ to ministry in the broad sense by committing the gospel to his church. Jesus exhorted those who believed in him, “You are the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). Prior to his ascension, Jesus charged his church of all time:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19,20). As those to whom the secrets of the kingdom of heaven have been given, the apostle Peter encourages all Christians to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet 3:15).

This common sharing in the gospel stems from a common identity in Christ. Peter writes, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9). These words of the apostle reflect important individual and corporate facets of the Christian’s identity in Christ. From an individual, subjective perspective, God has brought each Christian *personally* from darkness to light by the work of the Spirit through means of grace. From a corporate perspective, God has given *all* believers a common status in Christ and brought them together into *one* redeemed people – a people who are together heirs of God’s faithful love promised to David, who together stand in Christ as holy, and who together share one calling to declare God’s praise through the gospel that calls people from darkness to light. To the church, the body of Christ that shares all in common, the Savior has given his authority to proclaim his truth. Veith expounds this powerfully:

All believers, like the priests of the Old Testament, can come into the presence of God through the blood of the Lamb. All believers can handle holy things (such as the Bible, earlier denied to the laity). All can proclaim the Gospel to those who need its saving message... A father and a mother are ‘priests’ to their children, not only taking care of their physical needs, but nourishing them in the faith.<sup>45</sup>

Valleskey similarly comments, “While not every Christian is a public minister of the gospel, if you are a Christian you are a priest of God to whom the Lord has given the commission to

---

45. Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, Focal Point Series (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2002), 19.

‘declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.’”<sup>46</sup> This privileged status before God in Christ comes through the Spirit’s personal working of faith by the means of grace and gives every Christian the authority and responsibility of applying the Word of God to his brother and sister in faith.

### **Principle 2: The Members of Christ’s Body Express Mutual Care and Concern**

A common identity in Christ connects Christians with one another so intimately that Scripture calls them Christ’s body. Paul writes, “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:4,5). Commenting on John 15:1-5, Horton expresses the Christian reality this way: “[T]here is no personal relationship with Christ, the Vine, apart from his church, the branches.”<sup>47</sup> This concern for one another leads Dean to assert, “Every Christian is indeed a priest, and the priest’s efforts always turn outward toward those around about.”<sup>48</sup> Consequently, as members of the body of believers to whom Christ has committed his gospel, every Christian has the privilege and authority to apply God’s Word for the spiritual benefit of his or her fellow Christian.

Scripture expresses this truth in a variety of ways. After reminding his readers that this world’s time is short and these last days are characterized by temptation and sin, Paul encourages the Ephesians to live wisely and to make the most of every opportunity, “speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit” and making thankful music to God (Eph 5:19).

---

46. David J Valleskey, “Outreach Challenges Facing the WELS in the 21st Century,” *Wis. Lutheran Q.* 98.2 (2001): 83–96.

47. Horton, *Ordinary*, 173.

48. William Walter Dean, *A Church at Risk: The Encroachment of American Culture upon the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich: F. Asbury Press, 1990), 67-68.

Certainly, the scope of Paul’s encouragement includes mutual edification through corporate worship – but it also applies to the Christian’s entire *life of worship*, as believers encourage one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in every situation of life. Paul makes the same point more emphatically when he writes, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Col 3:16). Paul makes clear that Christ’s message dwells richly among his people not merely as they grow in the Word personally, but also as Christian applies God’s truth to Christian in love. That love is the motivating and guiding characteristic as believers apply the Word to one another is abundantly clear in Scripture. As Christ directed his disciples the night before the cross, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Indeed, Scripture asserts that Christ’s disciples do not merely have the *privilege* of caring for one another with God’s Word, they have the *responsibility*. As the writer to the Hebrews addresses Christians facing trouble for their faith and pressure to abandon Christ for the easier life of Judaism, he encourages God’s people not to harden their hearts as their ancestors had. He then charges them: Βλέπετε, ἀδελφοί, μήποτε ἔσται ἓν τινι ὑμῶν καρδία πονηρὰ ἀπιστίας ἐν τῷ ἀποστῆναι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος, “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (Heb 3:12). That is, the writer exhorts all the brothers and sisters to ensure that there isn’t *any* one among them (μήποτε ἔσται ἓν τινι ὑμῶν) who falls from faith – not one. The entire body of Christ is to look after the individual who forms part of that body; every believer becomes responsible for the spiritual well-being of the other Christians in their lives. This becomes eminently clear as the writer continues in the following verse: “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of

you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb 3:13). Similarly, Hebrews 12:15 states, “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” And when a fellow Christian does fall into sin, Scripture directs: “[Y]ou who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently” (Gal 6:1).

The privilege and responsibility Christians have for personally applying the Word of God to one another, while clearly emphasized in the New Testament, is also prominent in Old Testament Scripture. Concerning the commands of the LORD, Moses said to Israel: “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deut 6:7). The shared responsibility Christians have for one another likewise reflects God’s will to his Old Testament people: “Rebuke your neighbor frankly,” Moses commanded Israel, “so you will not share in their guilt” (Lev 19:17). Senkbeil beautifully summarizes the implications of this biblical perspective:

We are not created to live solitary lives; we are not redeemed to live solitary lives. And we are not sanctified all by ourselves either, thank God. That is what we learn in the third article. As the Holy spirit sanctifies me by the gospel, so he sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. And in that communion – that fellowship, or organic union – I experience not merely the forgiveness of my sins, but balm for my burdens and strength in times of temptation.<sup>49</sup>

### **Principle 3: Relational Discipleship Grows from a Nurtured Faith**

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul encourages these Christians to persevere in their faith “as to get the prize” (9:24). He then holds himself up as an example of one who disciplines himself “so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Cor 9:27). Therefore, even as the members of Christ’s body support one another, Scripture more fundamentally emphasizes the need for personal application of God’s law and gospel. Saving

---

49. Harold L Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” *Concordia J.* 40.4 (2014): 292–314.



faith is the Holy Spirit's work in the *individual* believer, and this personal faith connects the individual to the body of Christ, as Paul writes: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body" (1 Cor 12:13). Indeed, it is personal faith that makes an individual part of the one, royal priesthood and allows for a life of mutual concern, as discussed earlier.

Consequently, Scripture emphasizes the nurture of one's own faith as critical preparation for building up others. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught" (Col 2:6,7); and to the Ephesians, "From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph 4:16). So also the writer to the Hebrews admonished his readers toward maturity, "Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity" (Heb 6:1), and Peter similarly encourages spiritual growth as he writes, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Pet 2:2). As believers grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus, they grow in their ability to teach and admonish one another as Scripture directs (Col 3:16).

To aid God's people in their connection with Christ, the Lord has blessed his church with under-shepherds called to care for his flock. Peter encourages such Christian elders, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them... not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5:2,3). Christ's under-shepherds carry out this role by "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16) as they apply God's Word in regular worship, Bible studies, and one-on-one counseling. However, Christ's public representatives are also to prepare God's people *themselves* for building up the body of Christ with the Word. Paul

emphasizes this role when he writes: “So Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ,” “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:11,12). It is grammatically possible for εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ to function exegetically to πρὸς τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων εἰς ἔργον διακονίας, in which case one would render the phrase, “to equip his people for works of service, that is, to build up the body of Christ.” However, in the context Paul is emphasizing Christian relationship among the Ephesian believers and living as the body of Christ, exhorting them to “be completely humble and gentle” and to “be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph 4:2). Paul further emphasizes that “to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (Eph 4:7) – grace that saves in Christ and grace that empowers for Christian living. Therefore, the most natural rendering of verses 11 and 12 is that of the NIV – in short, that Christ has given his called workers to the church to prepare God’s people for the work of building up the body of Christ. Luther, too, translated the passage in this way: “daß die Heiligen zugerichtet werden zum Werk des Dienstes, dadurch der Leib Christi erbaut werde” (Eph 4:12 Luther Bibel 1545), “so that the saints may be made ready for works of service, by which the body of Christ might be built up.”<sup>50</sup>

Other places in Scripture similarly express that such communal, mutual edification is the goal of the body of Christ. In describing the Spirit’s varying gifts to Christ’s body of believers, Paul teaches the Corinthians, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). The Apostle Peter similarly points to such loving service as an effective and productive faith as he directs his readers:

[M]ake every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you

---

50. Thank you to Professor John Hartwig for assistance in translating.

possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet 1:5-8).

Clearly then, an important role for God’s public ministers is to help the body of Christ foster and apply the grace given to each member for the mutual edification of all.

### **Relational Discipleship in Action**

Relational discipleship – grounded in the universal priesthood, expressed in mutual Christian concern, and growing from personal connection with the Word of Life – can take varied and nuanced forms in the lives of Christians, from a parent singing Christian hymns with a child, to a college student warning his Christian friend of sin, to a small group of believers gathered at home around the Word. In the following paragraphs, I will illustrate relational discipleship through concrete examples organized under two headings which Scripture regularly addresses: admonishment and edification.<sup>51</sup>

God’s Word consistently highlights the responsibility Christ’s followers have to admonish one another. Moses commanded God’s people to rebuke sin in each other’s lives (Lev 19:17); Paul charges the Colossian Christians to “admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col 3:16); and after directing the Thessalonians to honor their leaders who care for and admonish them, Paul then commands the Thessalonian brothers and sisters as a whole: *νουθετεῖτε τοὺς ἀτάκτους*, “admonish those who are out of order or behaving inappropriately” (1 Thess 5:14, author’s translation). Paul similarly encourages the Roman Christians that they are *δυνάμενοι καὶ ἀλλήλους νουθετεῖν* – “capable to admonish one another” (Rom 15:14, author’s translation). This

---

51. Certainly, teaching Bible history – such as a mother teaching her child about creation – is an aspect of relational discipleship as well. But teaching the truths of God’s Word never has as its final goal mere head knowledge, as the Apostle John makes clear: “[T]hese are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Therefore, one can understand the ultimate aim of such instruction as admonishment, edification, or both.

is the same responsibility Jesus gives to his disciples: “If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them [ἐπιτίμησον αὐτῷ]” (Luke 17:3). While the New Testament commonly uses ἐπιτιμάω in the context of one with authority rebuking those entrusted to his responsibility, such as a pastor with his congregation, Luke also uses this same word here to describe every Christian’s responsibility to his brother or sister. Relational discipleship includes the hard work of opposing sin – and in fact Scripture places primary responsibility for rebuking sin on those in relationship with the admonished (e.g., Matt 18:15).

The Scriptures also speak extensively concerning the gospel work of edification. In Acts, Luke recounts multiple times the Apostle Paul’s work of encouraging and building up believers (Acts 14:22, 16:40, 20:1,2). Paul too recalls how Timothy worked “to strengthen and encourage” the Thessalonians in their faith (1 Thess 3:2), and Paul similarly commands Titus, “*Encourage* [italics added] and rebuke with all authority” (Titus 2:15). And yet Scripture makes abundantly clear that this privilege of edifying the body of Christ is not limited to God’s public, called workers. Jesus gave his believers the authority to pronounce forgiveness to repentant sinners: “[W]hatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt 18:18). According to the Apostle Paul, God’s public ministers prepare his people for works of service “so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:12). Paul further directs the Ephesians to speak “only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs” (Eph 4:29), he instructs the Thessalonians to encourage one another with Christ’s promise of resurrection (1 Thess 4:18) and to build each other up in view of their coming salvation (1 Thess 5:11), and he teaches the Corinthians to comfort one another with the comfort they have received from God (2 Cor 1:4). “[E]ncourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness,” the writer to the Hebrews says in 3:13, underscoring that God’s people ought to

constantly be about the work of encouraging one another while their time of grace continues.

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb 10:24,25) Scripture exhorts, teaching that encouragement in faith includes encouragement in the fruits of faith.

It is worth recalling the spirit of love and concern with which Christians engage in such relational discipleship. Admonishing and edifying will not always be easy. Quite the contrary, discipleship often calls for patiently bearing the weaknesses, faults, and burdens of other Christians. “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love,” Paul writes in Ephesians 4:2. And again the apostle instructs, “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up” (Rom 15:1,2). Admonishing in particular, Scripture teaches, will often require Christians to endure burdens with one another: “[I]f someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.... Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). Dean comments excellently:

God’s ordinary method of helping us is his children, his family. It is among believers that we find strength when we are weak, encouragement when we fail, help when we are in trouble – where we find people who will love us when we don’t even like ourselves. This is the pastoral work of the church – it is the work of God.<sup>52</sup>

Such pastoral work is to permeate the ordinary, everyday activities and lives of Christians. And yet, as I will address in the next section, it is this very work that struggles under the weight of contemporary American culture.

---

52. Dean, *A Church at Risk*, 145.

### PART 3: THE CHURCH AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

As demonstrated above, relational discipleship is built on relationships. Although the primary message of the gospel pertains to one's vertical relationship with God, this vertical relationship fundamentally changes the believer's horizontal relationships – especially among fellow Christians. Believers together form the body of Christ, each one belonging to the others, each caring for and supporting the others. Together Christians are heirs of God, together they possess the kingdom, together they will reign with Christ. Horizontal relationships are therefore fundamental to the Christian life and critical to relational discipleship.

And yet Christians form these relationships in a fallen world – a world where Scripture's exhortations toward mutual admonition and edification compete with the call of the surrounding culture. Such influence of culture on the church is nothing new. Camp, for example, discusses how the Christian church changed in the wake of Emperor Constantine's conversion and the subsequent legalization and establishment of the Christian faith, proposing that the church became more focused on ritual and hierarchy at the expense of discipleship and community.<sup>53</sup> Horton likewise notes, "Eventually, the gospel was taken for granted. It was simply assumed that if you were a European with a heartbeat, you were a Christian."<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein, Kolb comments on popular culture's impact on the eighteenth century church, observing that "[t]he

---

53. Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2008), 26-27.

54. Horton, *Ordinary*, 180.

Enlightened cultural domination of the Lutheran churches in Germany and, in milder form, in the Nordic lands, during the eighteenth century considerably weakened Lutheran piety because it altered perceptions of Christ, sin, atonement, and the nature and power of God's Word."<sup>55</sup>

Popular wisdom today suggests that the contemporary Christian church no longer strongly influences modern culture; instead, it is modern culture that influences the Christian church. McNeal asserts: "The American culture no longer props up the church the way it did, no longer automatically accepts the church as a player at the table in public life, and can be downright hostile to the church's presence.... [The] values of classic Christianity no longer dominate the way Americans believe or behave."<sup>56</sup> Barna likewise concludes, "The local church has certainly lost its place in the life routine of Americans. Long gone are the days when most people attended a church service each week. These days the turnout barely tops one-third of the population."<sup>57</sup> And Senkbeil argues that the church, as it struggles under the influence of contemporary culture, has become part of its own problem: "We are in many ways our own worst enemies. The culture we live in presents challenges to the Christian unprecedented in living memory, but the challenge lies not outside the church, but inside the church."<sup>58</sup>

Culture that has broadly influenced the church has certainly also, more narrowly, influenced its practice of relational discipleship. In the following section, therefore, I will explore four aspects of contemporary, Western culture that stand as obstacles to carrying out relational discipleship: individualism, compartmentalization, digitally-mediated relationships, and

---

55. Kolb, "Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition."

56. Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, 1st ed (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 5.

57. Barna, *America at the Crossroads*, 31.

58. Senkbeil, "Engaging Our Culture Faithfully," 298.

consumerism. This will then set the stage to discuss the implications of these cultural influences and the church's response in the final section of the paper.

### **Individualism**

Western culture is highly individualistic. This is something that one may perceive anecdotally by reflecting on American cultural values – such as pride in “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps” – but research has also documented this cultural attitude. Perhaps the best-known model of national culture is that based on the work of Dr. Geert Hofstede, which analyzes culture along six dimensions, including individualism versus collectivism.<sup>59</sup> As the name suggests, this dimension measures the degree to which an individual is expected to look out primarily for personal interests (individualism) versus the interests of a larger group (collectivism).<sup>60</sup> The Hofstede model assigns the United States an individualism score of 91, characterizing it as “one of the most individualist... cultures in the world.”<sup>61</sup> Hofstede Insights further comments:

[T]he expectation is that people look after themselves and their immediate families only and should not rely (too much) on authorities for support. There is also a high degree of geographical mobility in the United States. Americans are the best joiners in the world; however it is often difficult, especially among men, to develop deep friendships.<sup>62</sup>

While America has long been an individualistic country, inheriting such values from the Enlightenment, this cultural characteristic appears to have become yet more pronounced in

---

59. “National Culture,” *Hofstede Insights*, n.d., <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/models/national-culture/>.

60. “National Culture.”

61. “Country Comparison - US,” *Hofstede Insights*, n.d., <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/the-usa/>.

62. “Country Comparison - US.”



recent years.<sup>63</sup> Senkbeil observes that “what arose in 1960s America has tainted each succeeding generation, from the Boomers to the Gen-Xers to the Millennials, and now Generation Z.

Individualism... is very much with us.”<sup>64</sup> He goes on to illustrate the extensive reach of individualism across the world, asserting:

[E]xpressive individualism has prevailed in our world and now is the governing principle that defines reality across political and geographic borders, ethnic and language divisions, and social and economic status. People everywhere take it as axiomatic that there is no overarching truth, and that every person has the inherent right to exercise freedom of choice in any ethical decisions, since truth is in the eye of the beholder.<sup>65</sup>

Likewise, Horton describes the intense contemporary individualism characteristic of American culture, suggesting that “*novelty* is the decree of our age. Each generation is bombarded with advertisements, ideals, dreams, and expectations that appeal to our collective narcissism. We are special, unique, destined for greatness. Ours is *truly* the revolutionary generation [italics in original].”<sup>66</sup> Preoccupation with self, combined with economic expansion and modern mobility, means Americans can go so far as to redefine themselves “whenever [they] want a fresh start and a new set of supporting actors for [their] personalized life movie.”<sup>67</sup>

The American church has not been immune to the influence of extreme individualism. Hips argues that the growth of individualism has been key to transforming faith into an almost entirely private matter, where “the church exists primarily for improving my individual relationship with Jesus.... a shift that is antithetical to the biblical understanding of what it means

---

63. Mark Mattes notes that for all the division in American politics, “Both conservatives and liberals spring from the common heritage in Enlightenment thinking” which “affirms individual autonomy” (*Discipleship in the Lutheran Perspective*, 154).

64. Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” 296.

65. Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” 298.

66. Horton, *Ordinary*, 53.

67. Horton, *Ordinary*, 13.

to live as God’s people.”<sup>68</sup> Horton agrees, asserting: “In a land that increasingly defies any external authorities, personal faith and responsibility now mean that no human being – or even council of human beings – can interfere with the individual’s personal relationship with God.”<sup>69</sup> Such a private faith becomes evident in its outward expressions, moving from corporate engagement to individual experience. Barna comments, “Engagement in church life is clearly on a downward slope as well. It is more likely that individualized forms of faith activity will grow, especially through various forms of media and technology, than return to corporate religious activity in local church settings.”<sup>70</sup> The average American Christian, keeping in step with culture, continues to retreat into the subjective, private, and personal. And this is impacting not only the larger corporate expressions of faith, such as gathering at worship services or church activities, but reaches also into the home to the detriment of family discipleship practices of generations past. Horton notes: “For centuries, believers were raised with prayer, singing, instruction and Bible reading with the family each morning and evening,” but more recently “[a]s church and family disciplines were subordinated to private disciplines, the burden of growing in the faith was placed almost exclusively on the individual.”<sup>71</sup> The Barna Group’s research substantiates these observations: “Among Christians who say spiritual growth is important, more than one-third say they prefer to pursue spiritual growth on their own (37%). Similarly, two in five of all Christian adults consider their spiritual life to be ‘entirely private’ (41%).”<sup>72</sup>

---

68. Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2005), 55.

69. Horton, *Ordinary*, 180.

70. Barna, *America at the Crossroads*, 36.

71. Horton, *Ordinary*, 181.

72. “New Research on the State of Discipleship,” *Barna Group*, n.d., <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>.

Of course, a certain personal and individual emphasis is appropriate when it comes to the Christian's faith life. Christ's call to faith is personal, inviting *individuals* to find rest and reconciliation with God. Yet while the Lord desires that each Christian, personally and individually, makes faithful use of the means of grace for the strengthening of faith, the Christian faith is also strongly *corporate*. The Holy Spirit makes the Christian a member of God's family and Christ's body – a fellowship that suffers under an extreme individualism which relegates faith entirely to the personal and private. Hong observes: "Disciples of Christ cannot have an attitude of hyper-individualism when the Christian life is supposed to be characterized by love, koinonia, and humility."<sup>73</sup> Reflecting on the modern era, Hipps describes the result of such conflicting attitudes vividly: "The church community became little more than a collection of discrete individuals working on their personal relationships with Jesus. The church became 'a thousand points of light' and lost sight of the church as the body of Christ - a living, breathing entity, the essence of which depends on the binding interdependence of God's people."<sup>74</sup>

The growing emphasis on private faith and the corresponding devaluation of community has significantly impacted discipleship in the church. Whereas the name "Christian" properly implies a Spirit-born following of all that Christ teaches, such an undivided attitude is not necessarily an expectation in the modern church. Brittain comments, "Increasingly, Christians... believe that they have the right to decide for themselves what they will or won't believe, and whether they will or won't show up for a worship service. For many, identifying one's identity as

---

73. Stephen A Hong, "Reversing a Downward Spiral: Strengthening the Church's Community, Holiness and Unity through Intentional Discipleship," *Asian J. Pentecostal Stud.* 15.1 (2012): 89–125.

74. Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 54.

‘Christian’ does not necessarily commit oneself to a particular belief or practice.”<sup>75</sup> Being Christian and belonging to a Christian church, therefore, no longer necessarily includes the expectation of being disciplined by the church. One can assume the name “Christian” and belong to a church while also holding to beliefs that conflict with God’s revealed truth in the Scriptures – because, says Western culture, faith is private. Furthermore, such extreme individualism presents a strong barrier to the sort of community-based, relationship-oriented discipleship which the Scriptures encourage. Moon warns: “In a hyperindividualistic [sic] Western culture that encourages privacy and specialization, true community becomes increasingly rare.”<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the Barna Group concludes: “[W]hen it comes to what Christians are experiencing in the churches they attend, there does not seem to be much emphasis conveyed about the communal, relational nature of spiritual growth.”<sup>77</sup> As a result of this deterioration of Christian community, relational discipleship within the body of Christ suffers and a highly individualistic attitude grows. Such an attitude reasons, “Since I’m an independent Christian, I neither need other Christians in my Christian life, nor do I need their scriptural opinions, judgments, or wisdom. And since independence – not community – is the goal, then I also need not apply God’s law and gospel to others in my life for their spiritual good; rather, it’s everyone for themselves.” Simply put, the private faith encouraged by individualism contributes to Hong’s assessment that “the church today is not adequately discipling its members.”<sup>78</sup>

---

75. Christopher Brittain, “Plague on Both Their Houses: The Real Story of Growth and Decline in Liberal and Conservative Churches,” *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 8 May 2013, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/plague-on-both-their-houses-the-real-story-of-growth-and-decline/10099862>.

76. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 255.

77. “New Research on the State of Discipleship.”

78. Hong, “Reversing a Downward Spiral: Strengthening the Church’s Community, Holiness and Unity through Intentional Discipleship,” 119.

## Compartmentalization

Christ's gracious call to faith and discipleship is a call to death and resurrection that encompasses every aspect of the believer's life. Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matt 16:24,25).

Contemporary American culture, however, leads Christians to compartmentalize their faith – to establish barriers in life and experience within which faith applies and outside of which faith has little place. Often such compartmentalization is subtle, as popular culture shapes the Christian life; in recent years, however, it has become more overt. In the following paragraphs, I explore both these subtle and overt aspects of compartmentalization.

Camp opens his book *Mere Discipleship* with a discussion of what he calls "cultural Christianity." Using the genocide of Rwanda as an example, Camp suggests that historic Christianity has often failed to produce disciples who embrace the lordship of Jesus. "The proclamation of the 'gospel' has often failed to emphasize a fundamental element of the teaching of Jesus, and indeed of orthodox Christian doctrine: 'Jesus is Lord.'"<sup>79</sup> While Camp's theology may overemphasize submission to Christ, he rightly observes that the Christian faith, for some, has been merely a veneer. In his example of Rwanda – as neighbor murdered neighbor in a nation vastly Christian – Camp concludes: "'Christian' apparently denoted a faith brand name – a 'spirituality,' or a 'religion' – not a commitment to a common Lord."<sup>80</sup> Camp traces this cultural Christianity back to the transition of the early Christian church from persecuted to tolerated and finally to the exclusive religion of the Roman Empire. In the wake of this new

---

79. Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 20.

80. Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 20.

Christendom, observes Camp, the Christian faith became increasingly viewed as other-worldly rather than reflecting the new life in Christ here and now: “More crassly put, ‘salvation’ is increasingly viewed as a fire-insurance policy, a ‘Get Out of Hell Free Card’ guaranteeing an escape from the fires of torment and ensuring the receipt of treasures in heaven. In Christendom, the ‘whole world’ may be dubbed ‘Christian,’ and yet it is un-Christlike.”<sup>81</sup>

In Camp’s assessment, such Christianity has often failed to touch, affect, and redeem important, fundamental areas of life, such that the name Christian covers over what is often decidedly not Christian.<sup>82</sup> The result has been syncretism, where “culture is not sufficiently critiqued by Scripture” – a rut into which the modern church commonly falls, suggests Moon.<sup>83</sup> Although the U.S. Constitution precludes the unity of church and state that has been so prevalent elsewhere throughout history, aspects of American culture may rightly be labeled syncretistic. Kinnaman and Lyons observe, “Too many Christians have substituted comfortable living for a life changed by the gospel. The government’s tacit endorsement of vaguely Christian morals has made it difficult, in many ways, to discern what it means to be faithful, beyond showing up.”<sup>84</sup> Paustian similarly describes the compartmentalized life as an “uncritical acceptance of the world” and “a convenient religious sanction of plain worldliness.”<sup>85</sup> Though merely one example, the cultural Christianity of the southern United States serves to effectively illustrate the point, as Camp notes: “Particularly in the south there is a Christianity thoroughly sanctioned and

---

81. Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 27.

82. Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 27.

83. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 4-5.

84. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You’re Irrelevant and Extreme* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2016), 59.

85. Mark A. Paustian, “Unleashing Our Calling: Today’s Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocations,” 2006, 4, <http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/3616>.

supported by the prevailing winds” such that “‘church’ is inextricably intertwined with every facet of life.”<sup>86</sup> Camp comments on the perhaps unexpected effect of such cultural integration: “Christendom-like assumptions remain so pervasive that ‘Christianity’ gets sold short, removing any commitment to giving all to Christ or seeking first and only the kingdom of God.”<sup>87</sup> Put another way, the combination of culture and the Christian faith has led to a compartmentalization of faith, a cultural Christianity – one which claims the name Christian but in reality restricts faith by failing to adequately criticize culture.

On the other hand, an outright, overt separation of the spiritual and non-spiritual has become increasingly common today. Such isolation, notes Moon, is the other rut within which the modern church is commonly caught, where “culture is rejected or ignored, thereby separating faith from large sectors of life.”<sup>88</sup> Myers suggests this demarcation between the spiritual and non-spiritual has become a firm line in modern culture: “[T]he push-pull relegation of the church and its mission to the private realm of spiritual matters has become largely complete.”<sup>89</sup> And in discussing the impact of globalization over the last 200 years, Myers further observes: “When God and religion are relegated to the spiritual realm, they are treated as having nothing to contribute to the real world of politics, economics, and science.”<sup>90</sup> Horton’s assessment of contemporary culture agrees, speaking of “the secular conviction that faith does not interfere with public life but is properly located in the privacy of experience” and observing that “[t]he

---

86. Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 21.

87. Camp, *Mere Discipleship*, 27.

88. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 4–5.

89. Bryant L. Myers, *Engaging Globalization: The Poor, Christian Mission, and Our Hyperconnected World*, Mission in Global Community (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 102.

90. Myers, *Engaging Globalization*, 122.

fundamental attitude with respect to religion in the modern world has been to make it a private, interior matter.”<sup>91</sup> In this view, spiritual matters are what happen at church and are personal, subjective, and transcendent. They may have significant meaning for the individual believer, but they lack practical value in areas where human reason reigns supreme. Kolb similarly recognizes this as a common false perception of reality, a view which “divides the spiritual and the material, the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane.’”<sup>92</sup> Christians have clearly perceived the consequences of these cultural shifts, as millions of practicing Christians consider themselves marginalized and largely silenced by today’s culture.<sup>93</sup>

In both cases – whether from the perspective of a culture that integrates with Christianity or ostracizes it – compartmentalization of faith is the common result. The truth of God’s Word revealed in law and gospel is confined: in the former more subtly, as culture colors God’s truth; in the latter more overtly, as culture segregates this ultimate truth from life and experience. As a result, Christians begin to view Christ and his message as less applicable to some areas of life – or even entirely inapplicable. Christians grant that Scripture speaks to ultimate matters like eternity, but then may separate these from important everyday concerns – what Moon calls “middle issues,” which Western Christians often fail to place under the lens of Scripture for guidance.<sup>94</sup> This has profound implications for one’s personal faith life, and it no less impacts the life of faith which believers in Christ share with one another. When Christ’s disciples fail to see Christ’s truth as applicable to a given aspect of life, they are selling short their new identity as a

---

91. Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” 143.

92. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

93. Barna Group, ed., *Barna Trends 2017: What’s New and What’s Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2016), 42.

94. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 30.



kingdom of priests in Christ – an identity which embraces every area of life and which takes captive every thought and judgment to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Moreover, this perspective presents obstacles in ministering to one another with the Word of Truth. For when a Christian fails to see the connection between the spiritual and the material, he or she will fail to point a fellow believer to the truth of Scripture that embraces every aspect of the Christian life in the here and now. The result is an attitude among Christians that “leaves spiritual stuff to what happens at the church, thereby delegating spiritual formation to the institution”<sup>95</sup> instead of engaging the everyday as a valuable opportunity to integrate Christ into ordinary living. Discipleship within the body of Christ becomes merely what is done on a Sunday morning.

### **Digitally-Mediated Relationships**

Technology has had an undeniable impact on American society and culture in the last one hundred years. The world has become more mobile, more efficient, and – especially with the advent of the Internet – more in-touch. “The explosive growth and widespread dissemination of new communication technologies during the past two decades – particularly the proliferation of high-speed internet and internet-enabled devices – has fundamentally altered the way we communicate and interact.”<sup>96</sup> This shift to digital communication has, in turn, led to digitally-mediated relationships – relationships which are born and sustained primarily through digital interaction.

Modern Western culture has embraced technology with open arms. The Barna Group notes that 45% of Americans spend between one and three hours online per day, while almost

---

95. McNeal, *The Present Future*, 88.

96. Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2017*, 118.

20% spend between three and five hours online. TV usage remains high as well, with 76% of Americans spending three or more hours watching television every day.<sup>97</sup> And while families are recognizing the importance of balancing wired and non-wired time, they are struggling to do so: 31% of parents identify managing physical activity versus online activity as a key challenge.<sup>98</sup>

Despite all the advances in communication technology, Americans are in many ways feeling more isolated than ever. Senkbeil observes, “The frantic busyness of our world is a symptom of the pain and isolation everywhere.... We are so busy we can’t connect through genuine conversation.”<sup>99</sup> Horton likewise summarizes the impact of this conflux of technology on relationships:

With our automobile-driven culture of climate-controlled suburbia, anonymous individualism deposits us in our garage without having to bother with others. Add to that now the isolation of having the world at your fingertips in front of a screen – TV, Internet, and phone – and it’s easy to see why we’ve become quite different people in barely a generation.<sup>100</sup>

Such isolation is the result of replacing genuine community with digital displays that all too often share information but fail to build relationships. Hipps highlights this unintended effect of technology, calling Americans “electronic nomads” who struggle to find real community and whose virtual relationships “provide just enough of a connection to paralyze [their] best efforts at unmediated community.”<sup>101</sup> That is, Americans stay in contact just enough to keep them from seeking out face-to-face, in-person interactions – the type that make a difference in building true community. Horton opines: “Sure, much has been gained with email and texting – especially the

---

97. Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2017*, 95.

98. Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2017*, 118.

99. Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” 306.

100. Horton, *Ordinary*, 62.

101. Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 110–11.

ease with which we can be in touch with many people. Still, much is lost, such as intimacy, reflective interaction and relationships, and care. The medium makes a difference.”<sup>102</sup>

The challenges modern America faces in forming community have not abated in light of more recent advances in digital communication such as social media. Despite the moniker “social” and the talk of “communities” and “sharing,” social media may be making Americans less social and less authentically connected. Barna Group research shows that “56 percent of adults say they believe social media has made people less social, less capable of deep friendships and strong connections,” leaving people lonelier today than 10 years ago.<sup>103</sup> Horton similarly distinguishes between what is *called* community and true community:

Community requires coherence, cohesion, and consensus – over time and, depending on the type of community, across spatial borders as well. Unlike Internet connections, deep community requires face-to-face, embodied engagement and accountability. You can’t just ‘unfriend’ your next-door neighbor, much less your spouse or children, without daily repercussions.<sup>104</sup>

And the challenges and barriers to real relationships and community will only be greater for younger people who are increasingly relying on digital tools to mediate between family and friends. “Half of Millennials say that their gadgets actually get in the way of their relationships,” notes the Barna Group.<sup>105</sup> And many young people, comments Horton, have developed deep habits that “make it difficult for them to belong to any particular group with any serious and long-term investment.”<sup>106</sup>

---

102. Horton, *Ordinary*, 63–64.

103. Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2017*, 114–15.

104. Horton, *Ordinary*, 63.

105. Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2017*, 16.

106. Horton, *Ordinary*, 63.

These broader societal changes in communication and community present an obvious challenge for the church. God has called Christians to true community in his Son. Membership in the body of Christ links one intimately with all other Christians – a relationship that finds expression most naturally among Christians present in one another’s lives. God has called believers to bear with one another (Eph 4:2), not “unfriend” one another when the waters get rough. He desires that his children carry each other’s burdens (Gal 6:2), something that often requires persistent, embodied, and personal connection that does not get lost in the barrage of bits and bytes and overflowing inboxes. And yet, modern communication trends have in many ways created distance and separation among Christians. The isolation within society, Senkbeil observes, is “a loneliness epidemic that also threatens the fellowship of the church.”<sup>107</sup> Virtual connections grow at the expense of authentic community that “offers the deepest levels of acceptance, intimacy, and support”<sup>108</sup> – the kinds of expressions of love for which God has designed the body of Christ. Certainly, digital communication tools are a blessing through which Christians can and should share genuine care and concern – but the community of a Facebook group and the relationships of an Internet forum remain a shallow substitute for persistent and present human connections in the physical world. Moreover, when technology becomes primarily entertainment and a one-way lane from the world to one’s palm, there is little opportunity even for digitally-mediated relationships. Senkbeil draws the distinction clearly: “Technology provides, at best, a parody of that community of the holy Christian church in which sorrows are diminished and people uphold and encourage one another in the bond of Christian love and compassion.”<sup>109</sup> This is not a failure of technology but a failure to properly apply it,

---

107. Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” 306.

108. Hips, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 111.

mistaking a post or an email or a text for the persistent and personal presence of one Christian in the life of another.

### **Consumerism**

Consumerism has become a persistent, embedded characteristic of contemporary Western culture. Elton calls it “society’s prevailing story, the story in which young people cultivate their identity.”<sup>110</sup> Jethani similarly summarizes its pervasive influence: “[W]e come to recognize consumerism as the predominant worldview of North Americans. It represents a set of presuppositions most of us have been formed to carry without question or critique. More than merely an economic system, it is the framework through which we understand everything.”<sup>111</sup> In modern America, consumerism has become engrained in the daily patterns of life to the point where its influence is not simply felt or observed, but lived.

Consumerism may be defined as “[t]he preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods,”<sup>112</sup> or similarly “the situation when too much attention is given to buying and owning things, often things that are not really necessary.”<sup>113</sup> Deeply-rooted, pervasive consumerism within a culture leads to a society characterized by consumption. Elton explains:

In a consumerist society, consumption is the orienting principle and commodities are its currency. Consumption, once a function for sustaining life, has now become the main

---

109. Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” 306.

110. Terri Martinson Elton, “The Story We Find Ourselves in: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture,” *Word & World* 34, no. 2 (2014): 168–177.

111. Skye Jethani, “The Unholy Trinity of Consumerism,” *Cult. Encount.* 6.1 (2010): 79–85.

112. *OXFORD DICTIONARIES / ENGLISH*, s.v. “Consumerism | Definition of Consumerism in English by Oxford Dictionaries.”

113. *CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY*, s.v. “CONSUMERISM | Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary.”

activity. Commodities, once limited to goods and services needed for survival, have expanded to include values, beliefs, and labor.<sup>114</sup>

Elton further elaborates: “In this view, constructing meaning is all about one’s choices in consuming. Values and beliefs ‘float’ in society as commodities, apart from tradition, heritage, or particular communities.”<sup>115</sup> In other words, one’s perspective on life, its purpose, and what truly matters stems from one’s personal choice in the marketplace of ideas rather than being learned and experienced through community.

Predictably, consumerism in the broader American culture is shaping attitudes within the church as well – most profoundly in the individual Christian’s attitude toward God. Jethani describes the sad result of the rise of consumerism:

The reduction of even sacred things into commodities also explains why we exhibit so little reverence for God—in a consumer worldview, he has no intrinsic value apart from his usefulness to us. God is merely a means to an end—a happier life, a ticket to heaven, a strategy for managing sin or addiction.... We ascribe value to him... based not on who he is, but on what he can do for us.<sup>116</sup>

And similar to individualism, consumerism teaches Christians to see the church as a tool – particularly as a means to support and facilitate one’s own private faith life. Hipps comments, “In this thoroughly modern, consumer-driven setting, church and community are valued, but only if they strengthen a Christian’s personal relationship with Jesus. In this sense, community is little more than a tool. It is viewed simply as a tactical support mechanism for helping individuals better pursue their own private faiths.”<sup>117</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons likewise speak of a “morality of self-fulfillment [that] has taken hold of the hearts and minds of practicing

---

114. Elton, “The Story We Find Ourselves in: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture,” 169.

115. Elton, “The Story We Find Ourselves in: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture,” 171.

116. Jethani, “The Unholy Trinity of Consumerism,” 80.

117. Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 100.

Christians” and which “exposes an area of dangerous weakness in today’s church.”<sup>118</sup> The consumerism rampant in contemporary culture teaches Christians to maximize personal satisfaction in every area of life, from a newborn’s diapers to the dearly departed’s headstone, and therefore it is no wonder that God’s people approach their relationship with God and one another from this viewpoint as well.

The growing perspective that views relationship with God and Christian community as commodities to be traded has led some churches to conform to such expectations, seeking to give the never-satisfied worshiper what is most popular in the moment. Hipps argues:

[W]e have imported far too many of the assumptions of our secular culture into the church. We have abandoned teaching in favor of coaching. We have abandoned teaching truth and focused on self-improvement programs. We seem to be driven more by polls and approval ratings than we are by the word of God. We have embraced the expectations and norms of our culture and begun to remodel the church in the image and likeness of the world.<sup>119</sup>

Senkbeil agrees, drawing parallels to the challenges faced during the Reformation: “The sad truth is that the message of personal happiness and success heard in the pulpits of America today is the practical equivalent of the worst kinds of moralism promulgated in the Roman church of Luther’s day, albeit cloaked in secular wrappings and shorn of much of its spiritual veneer.”<sup>120</sup> From personal observation, WELS has certainly fared better than other churches in this storm, holding fast to the singular truth of the gospel over and above all else. Still, one should not assume that WELS Christians are immune from the impact. Hopman’s observations on broader Lutheranism apply to WELS churches, too: “[C]lassical Lutheran piety, in which preaching properly distinguishes law and gospel, centered on the Small Catechism’s summary of Scripture,

---

118. Kinnaman and Lyons, *Good Faith*, 60.

119. Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 296.

120. Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” 300.

struggles to compete in the consumeristic American religious marketplace eager for the latest brand names, code words, and programs.”<sup>121</sup> Therefore, the danger exists even in the WELS to sacrifice the often slow and steady work of the Spirit through law and gospel for what is glitzy, glamorous, and riding the wave of religious consumer sentiment at any given time. Taken to its extreme, such a development would be devastating and would, as Horton suggests, turn the church into just “another service provider governed by the autonomous choices of consumers, simply perpetuating the illusion of self-sovereignty that leads to death.”<sup>122</sup>

Naturally, the highly self-sensitive nature of consumerism stands to threaten true Christian community as advocated in Scripture. This becomes obvious as Christians, dissatisfied with a given church, launch on a campaign of “church shopping” to find the right mix of environment, message, and value for them. While evaluating a church is not wrong – in fact, Scripture commands that Christians judge all teaching in light of God’s Word (2 Tim 1:13) – church shopping fueled by consumerism tends to sacrifice what is truly important for the superficial. Jethani highlights this change in recent history, noting how doctrine and teaching has taken a back seat to music style as a driving factor in selecting a church. “Like Nike, Starbucks, and Apple, the church has learned that success in a consumer culture has more to do with the packaging than the product.”<sup>123</sup> Horton portrays the natural result of this consumeristic approach to church membership:

We choose a local church the way we choose a neighborhood, a phone company, or a new car. We might become a member, or we might not. There may not even be membership (since that would be too formal and interfere with a person’s relationship with Christ). Instead church leaders will bend over backwards to make sure people (at

---

121. Nicholas Hopman, “Giving Up the ...Ship: Classical Lutheran Piety versus Discipleship,” *The Cresset* 78.5 (2015): 50–53.

122. Horton, *Ordinary*, 102.

123. Jethani, “The Unholy Trinity of Consumerism,” 84.



least the right people) are happy, because they know that you can go to the church down the highway, one that has a wider menu of options.<sup>124</sup>

The impact on lasting community is obvious: Christian relationships simply cannot thrive in an environment that emphasizes personal satisfaction above all else.

And where Christian community suffers, so does relational discipleship. McNeal comments, “The communal aspect of spiritual formation is often neglected in a North American culture that has too often turned church membership to consumerism.... This situation is a far cry from a healthy church life where each person would be contributing to others for his or her own growth.”<sup>125</sup> A church culture that caters to private faith simply cannot facilitate the formation of Christian relationships in which relational discipleship thrives. Rather, the result is anonymity in which “there is of course no church discipline – that is, genuine spiritual oversight and care.”<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, consumerism not only mitigates the formation of relationships and the practice of relational discipleship, it also conflicts with the central truths upon which Christian relationships are built. Horton observes:

Where the biblical message calls us to the cross, to die to self and to be raised in Christ, the new message calls the old Adam to an improved self, empowered to fulfill more easily his own life project. The new evangelism negotiates a contract with the sinner rather than announcing God’s judgment on the sinner and the good news of a covenant of grace.<sup>127</sup>

And where the message of sin and grace is not clearly preached from the pulpit, it will scarcely be found within the Christian community.

---

124. Horton, *Ordinary*, 132.

125. McNeal, *The Present Future*, 83.

126. Horton, *Ordinary*, 132.

127. Horton, *Ordinary*, 102.

### Closing Thoughts on Cultural Influence

Christians have never been immune to the influences of the culture around them, positive or negative, but contemporary culture's intersection of high individualism, compartmentalization, digitally-mediated connection, and consumerism presents a unique challenge to forming Christian community and carrying out relational discipleship. The signals Christians receive from the surrounding culture and the habits Christians are learning are, in many ways, reinforcing the self-centered attitude of the fallen human heart, including in the arena of relationships and community. Modern American culture validates, facilitates, and even demands a sense of self that is increasingly independent and progressively oriented around self-satisfaction. And though no longer of the world, the church militant cannot help but reflect culture to some degree, composed as it is of sinner-saints.

Yet the church must also be counter-cultural. It is not enough to recognize the challenges to Christian relationship inherent in Western culture – God's people must also consider how to respond. Christ's followers must consider how Christian truth challenges culture. *The church must consider how it disciplines*. Kolb speaks powerfully to the issue at hand:

Perhaps, however, the most important question we face as we look at the more recent history of Lutheranism is why in the last two hundred years, and particularly in the last fifty years, have Lutherans not done a better job at the task of the cultural translation of our understanding of the pious Christian life into the world of today. Many answers may be offered, from the power of media and our failure to capitalize on new developments as quickly as Luther did, to the demise of the culture and more immediate communities around us that supported that piety instead of undermined it. But the most basic reasons that command our attention lie at the foundation of our existence as believers, hearers, disciples, children of God in his congregation. We need to examine again the ways in which we deliver the promise of life from and in Jesus Christ to his people. We need to work on the ways in which both the law and the gospel speak to people who conceive of sin and evil and of life, its sources and its several dimensions in much different ways than their parents and certainly than their forbearers several generations ago.<sup>128</sup>

---

128. Kolb, "Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition."

It is this goal of engaging in discipleship – applying the law and gospel to the lives of Christians – that will be considered next.

## PART 4: A PRINCIPLED RESPONSE

The confluence of cultural attributes impacting the church today may be unique, but the challenge of engaging the body of Christ in relational discipleship is nothing new. Amsdorf recognized the need to address this among the nascent Lutheran church of his day, and especially so in the home, where the reformers struggled to engage Lutheran parents in leading their households into God’s Word.<sup>129</sup> In the years following the Reformation, there were those who saw the need and reacted – Hans Nielsen Hauge, Carl Olof Rosenius, Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, among others – those who led efforts to bring God’s people into greater contact with the Word.<sup>130</sup> They recognized like Luther that “faithful hearing and reading of Scripture lay at the heart of the cultivation of piety or discipleship.”<sup>131</sup> But although Luther firmly taught that Christ’s *church* – not a select few – possesses the gospel for the benefit of the body, “Luther’s followers have often chosen to ignore his concept of the priesthood of all believers, at least in regard to the responsibilities of that priesthood, which too many have wanted to shunt to their pastors.”<sup>132</sup>

---

129. Kolb, “Parents Should Explain the Sermon: Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent,” 239.

130. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

131. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

132. Kolb, “Parents Should Explain the Sermon: Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent.”

Nevertheless, the context of the modern church presents unique challenges to relational discipleship. Under the weight of a culture that prizes extreme individualism, sets ever-expanding limits on the purview of faith, substitutes digital interaction for genuine relationships, and encourages Christians to view the body of believers as a commodity – in such a culture, the American church today faces a new phase in the struggle to cultivate relational discipleship. Lutheran pastors recognize this challenge. Ewart comments, “Our experience has been that people are hungry for in-person interaction that allows them to take spiritual truths and discuss them in the context of real life.”<sup>133</sup> Hein similarly observes that the emphasis on relationship within the body of Christ is “something the American church has been missing for years.”<sup>134</sup> Therefore, just as Lutheran leaders have in the past, the church today must seek to understand its context and consider how God’s Word leads it to respond.

Of course, the direction of God’s Word is clear: make disciples, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20). Christ has blessed his church with his words which will never pass away, his gospel which shines in the darkness, his truth which equips his people for every good work. Consequently, in considering how to respond to challenges that are, in the end, the same obstacles that Satan, the world, and the sinful flesh have long placed before Christians, one must resist overemphasizing method. “Churches around the world are searching for discipleship *methods* [italics added] to transform Christ followers,” notes Moon.<sup>135</sup> Certainly, method plays a role; but the goal cannot be the development of a sure-fire system that will transform the neophyte believer into a teacher and evangelizer within the church. No such

---

133. Matt Ewart, “Interview Questionnaire: Growth Groups at Bethlehem Lakeville,” Questionnaire, 5 November 2018.

134. James Hein, “Discipleship at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Questionnaire,” Questionnaire, 2 November 2018.

135. Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship*, 19.

system exists. Rather, the church must recognize that God has designed the body of Christ for relational discipleship and determine how best to facilitate its natural expression in this modern context.

Therefore, in this closing section of the paper I will return to the scriptural principles of relational discipleship outlined earlier and consider how those may be implemented at a congregational level. While there are many approaches to combating culture's influence on the church, I will demonstrate how the small group can be an effective means to encourage and facilitate relational discipleship from a scriptural perspective. This discussion will primarily employ the original research on the five WELS congregations identified earlier. While the small scale of this research naturally limits the conclusions one can draw, these accounts are nevertheless valuable examples of how the church can reclaim relational discipleship – and the blessings God can bring through it.

### **A Definition of Small Group**

The term “small group” can have various meanings in Christian circles, and an exhaustive exploration of the structure and function of small groups is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, moving forward the following basic definition will be employed which emphasizes the small group's communal nature around a shared concern: a “small group” is any gathering of two or more believers outside of corporate worship intended to encourage growth in faith, provide mutual support as the body of Christ, or give expression to Christian fellowship. Examples of such small groups might include believers gathered for Bible study, prayer, hymn singing, a service project, mutual support, or simply Christian fellowship.

### **Embracing the Priesthood of All Believers**

As noted previously, Lutheran congregations have long struggled with a tendency to shift to the pastor all responsibility for employing God’s Word to build up the community of believers, both in the home and in the larger church. Today, this tendency has only increased as Christians have come under the influence of an extreme individualism that encourages a private faith and a consumer mentality that views the church as existing merely to satisfy one spiritually, emotionally, or intellectually – a far cry from the shared status of a royal priesthood with the privilege of declaring God’s praise through the gospel. Therefore, as the American church seeks to build a scriptural culture characterized by relational discipleship, its leaders will need to intentionally and purposefully embrace the priesthood of all believers. WELS churches do this well already, at least in part. By God’s grace, WELS pulpits remain the place where sinners are cut by God’s law and healed by his gospel – the very way in which the Spirit calls individuals from darkness to his wonderful light. What may need greater emphasis, however, are the resulting blessings of the universal priesthood: the authority and responsibility shared by believers to handle and apply the Word of Truth.

Small groups provide one example of how congregations can purposefully apply this scriptural principle, as such groups often afford the opportunity for Christian brothers and sisters to share God’s Word in various life circumstances. Ewart comments on Bethlehem’s experience: “We have also found that much of the relational care that traditionally comes from the pastor is naturally assumed by the group. When people go the hospital, their first phone call is to their growth group, not their pastor. When someone has a prayer request, they pray about it in their small group.”<sup>136</sup> Workentine similarly recounts how St. Mark’s small group members often pray

---

136. Ewart, “Interview Questionnaire: Growth Groups at Bethlehem Lakeville.”

for one another and minister to each other, at home or in the hospital – Christian concern born from relationships built around the Word of God. He comments, “There’s spiritual care going on there, attached to a name, [that] I could never hope to replicate.”<sup>137</sup> And at Crosswalk, small group members – and especially leaders – see such relational discipleship as their *responsibility* within the community of Christ: “[M]embers look at it as their responsibility to shepherd each other. The Elders, Pastor and staff intervene only when there are special circumstances or when they are approached for guidance by the group leaders.”<sup>138</sup> In all of these examples, the small groups are not merely environments in which the pastor can more directly and contextually apply God’s Word to the lives of his members; they are rather a community of Christians who have embraced Scripture’s teaching on the priesthood of all believers, recognizing their common responsibility and privilege to handle the means of grace for their mutual edification. In this way, small groups become focal points for relational discipleship and work against the self-oriented signals of contemporary culture.

Regardless of the form relational discipleship takes in a congregation, embracing the priesthood of all believers is imperative – and it begins with the pastor. A culture of thriving relational discipleship impacts not only Christian peers in community with one another, but also the pastor called to shepherd them. Some pastors may find it a challenge to share the duty of pastoral care with the larger Christian community, operating with a pastor-centric view of the ministry which “teaches that in the church, the pastor, not the people must do the work of ministry.”<sup>139</sup> Of course, one must recognize and maintain the unique role of the pastor in the

---

137. Ben Workentine, “Interview with Pastor Ben Workentine on Discipleship at St. Mark, De Pere,” Telephone, 7 December 2018.

138. Dan Solofra, “Discipleship at CrossWalk Church, Phoenix, Questionnaire,” Questionnaire, 28 November 2018.



congregation via his call to public ministry. The Holy Spirit has set him as a shepherd to serve those entrusted to him. Nevertheless, upholding the integrity of the call does not (and cannot) conflict with God’s advocations for his people to share in the work of spiritual edification – both are scriptural teachings. Workentine comments on the practical benefits of sharing this work with his fellow believers: “If shepherding happened only by the pastors in a church like St. Mark, we’d have to have 35 pastors.... Instead of getting territorial, I find that it’s... a blessing that people’s needs, spiritual needs are being met in law/gospel, the means of grace, through prayer... with people who know them intimately.”<sup>140</sup>

In addition to the pastor himself recognizing the priesthood of all believers, embracing this principle also means purposefully communicating this truth and facilitating its use within the congregation. Therefore, consistent preaching and teaching of the universal priesthood becomes imperative to lay the proper foundation for relational discipleship. The specific form such instruction takes will vary with the congregation, but certainly sermons, Bible classes, small groups, workshops, and printed material are all appropriate avenues for communicating the Christian’s common status before God and the shared task of applying his Word to fellow Christians. Moreover, setting expectations for Christians seeking membership can be an effective way to underscore the role relational discipleship plays in the life of a Christian. For example, Ewart comments, “We are very upfront with new members (regardless of their church background) that this is a church of small groups. To be a member means you are in a small group.”<sup>141</sup> Establishing relational discipleship as the norm up front not only helps build the

---

139. Aubrey Malphurs, *Maximizing Your Effectiveness: How to Discover and Develop Your Divine Design*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2006), 23.

140. Workentine, “Interview with Pastor Ben Workentine on Discipleship at St. Mark, De Pere.”

141. Ewart, “Interview Questionnaire: Growth Groups at Bethlehem Lakeville.”

culture early on, but also provides an opportunity to begin teaching the underlying principles to believers new to the faith or simply new to the church. And given American culture's persistent consumeristic influence on Christians new and old, effective teaching will take time, patience, and repetition.

Finally, successful communication and facilitation of the universal priesthood is not merely a matter of what one teaches, but also of *how* one teaches; that is, a pastor communicates the universal priesthood not simply by proclaiming its truth but by embracing it as he shepherds – by *modeling* it. As this crosses into the third principle of relational discipleship, this subject will be addressed in more detail below.

### **Facilitating Mutual Concern**

“Love comes from God” (1 John 4:7), the Apostle John teaches us. “The fruit of the Spirit is love” (Gal 5:22), the Apostle Paul writes. Scripture is clear that the mutual love and concern which characterizes the body of Christ is something that God himself produces through the means of grace. It is not something that congregational leadership can produce with the right process or legalistically demand. It is truly a fruit of faith.

However, the church still plays an important role in facilitating relational discipleship among its members – especially in view of the broader culture's growing tendency toward digitally-mediated relationships and its persistent drum beat for a private, compartmentalized faith. Of course, this work builds on the foundation of gospel ministry which alone creates faith, connects Christians to Christ and one another, and daily sustains that faith – from the pulpit to the sacraments to Bible classes to counseling to mutual Christian edification. Still, making space for the development and expression of Christian relationships is essential. This insight from

Bethlehem's growth group plan speaks well to the point: "While a church cannot create the relationships that form the web of authentic Christian community, a church can create environments where these relationships can be discovered and developed."<sup>142</sup> Solofra similarly states, "We believe that it is essential for all groups of people to have a structured system that allows people to grow organically. The structure is what we call 'environments.' These are places that we encourage people to go that organic relations happen naturally."<sup>143</sup> Whether a church focuses on small groups, establishes a mentorship program, or simply begins with break-out groups in Bible classes, the goal is the same: to enable Christians to build in-person relationships with one another that form the basis for relational discipleship.

The potential to form such relationships is particularly important for younger generations. Hein comments: "[A] church that doesn't foster relationships won't survive with this generation's young adults," and "if the only engagement you get with young adult Christians is during a worship service, they'll eventually leave. This is because most of them intuitively understand that church needs to be more relational than that."<sup>144</sup> Workentine likewise makes this assessment on the importance of relationships: "My read is, it is exactly the thing that especially the Millennial generation longs most deeply for. They are looking for connection, they are looking for meaning, they are looking for real relationships that, that are more than just surface-level, that are more than just... a common affinity for the Green Bay Packers."<sup>145</sup> Barna Group research validates the high value and impact of such relationships among young people: "Millennials who continue in the Christian faith into adulthood are twice as likely (59%) as those

---

142. "Overview of Bethlehem Growth Group System," n.d.

143. Solofra, "Discipleship at CrossWalk Church, Phoenix, Questionnaire."

144. Hein, "Discipleship at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Questionnaire."

145. Workentine, "Interview with Pastor Ben Workentine on Discipleship at St. Mark, De Pere."

who don't (31%) to say that, as a young person, they had a close personal friendship with an adult in their church. Meaningful relationships matter if learning is to last."<sup>146</sup> Perhaps because today's young Christians have grown up in a world of consumerism, private faith, and status updates, the longing for genuine, lasting connection and a shared faith is all the greater.

Congregations can play an important role by intentionally creating environments where these Christians can experience their faith together with other Christians across generations. Elton summarizes the issue well: "Christian communities are called to help young people discover who and whose they are. As people of faith our identity is countercultural, and unless we help young people frame their identity within a Christian narrative, young people are left to see faith and Christianity as another commodity to consume."<sup>147</sup>

The environments designed to facilitate community and relationship do not, by any means, replace or devalue corporate worship. Public worship provides important opportunities for mutual edification as the body of Christ together gathers around Word and sacrament.

However, it is important to recognize the limitations inherent in a large gathering of believers.

Hein observes:

Corporate worship... is almost entirely designed to cultivate a vertical relationship with God. This is obvious from the way sanctuaries are set up (everyone seated in one direction), to the lack of personal interaction. As currently structured, it's unfortunately entirely possible to walk into a worship service and eventually leave without ever actually interacting with another person.<sup>148</sup>

While there certainly is interaction in corporate worship, services are not commonly designed to allow for the kind of personal interaction in which one Christian applies the truth of God's Word

---

146. Barna Group, *Barna Trends 2017.*, 75.

147. Elton, "The Story We Find Ourselves in: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture." 175.

148. Hein, "Discipleship at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Questionnaire."

to a specific need of another Christian. In other words, corporate worship focuses on the proclamation and application of God’s truth to the entire body of believers rather than the exploration and application of that truth in the context of one Christian’s relationship with another. This type of mutual edification most naturally occurs outside of the worship service, as Christian lives life with Christian. And so, Hein argues: “[C]hurches must have intentional spaces in which believers can personally interact with the brothers and sisters that Jesus has placed his Spirit into.”<sup>149</sup>

Small groups can serve as an effective means both for establishing the personal connections necessary for relational discipleship as well as providing opportunities for its exercise. Hein comments, “Small groups foster the horizontal component of the body of believers, creating both a deeper relationship with Jesus as well as a deeper relationship with his people.”<sup>150</sup> Ewart similarly observes, “[W]e have found that the authentic Christian relationships that grow in these group environments allow for people to provide pastoral care that typically falls on the pastor or is assigned to the whole church.”<sup>151</sup> In a society and culture that promote a private, compartmentalized faith and reduce connection to a touchscreen, such small group environments help Christians to minister very personally to one another with law and gospel. Hein notes, “Our men’s and women’s groups, in particular, do a lot of peer-to-peer accountability.”<sup>152</sup> Workentine likewise elaborates:

It is a foreign concept to... have that level of openness and authenticity and directedness...that accountability of saying, ‘No, that decision you made was not

---

149. Hein, “Discipleship at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Questionnaire.”

150. Hein, “Discipleship at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Questionnaire.”

151. Ewart, “Interview Questionnaire: Growth Groups at Bethlehem Lakeville.”

152. Hein, “Discipleship at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Questionnaire.”

right’.... In a world that affirms every choice and every option, to have a group that says, ‘Nope... there are choices that are wrong... and here’s what Jesus did about them.’<sup>153</sup>

The relationships developed in small groups can also play a particularly valuable role in discipling those new to the Christian faith and integrating them into the larger body of believers. Qualmann comments that “those who get involved in a growth group right away are almost always assimilated.”<sup>154</sup> Hein’s assessment is similar: Small groups are the “[a]bsolute best way to assimilate new members.”<sup>155</sup>

The small group is only one way for a congregation to embrace Scripture’s encouragement to mutual edification – but it has proven effective. Ewart’s anecdote is inspiring:

There was a woman in her late thirties whose brother unexpectedly passed away due to an accident. She had to travel back to her hometown for the funeral which was about five hours away. As you can perhaps guess, her pastor was not able to be there with her during that time. But her group was. Several people from her growth group showed up unannounced and were simply there for her during that time of grieving. She can’t tell you that story without tears in her eyes. That’s one of many stories that confirm for us that while we cannot create authentic Christian relationships, we can create environments where those relationships are happening.<sup>156</sup>

Clearly, intentional and purposeful investment in Christian relationships – facilitating mutual concern – has the potential to lead to truly countercultural Christian living.

### **Nurturing Christians for Relational Discipleship**

Scripture charges Christ’s shepherds to “[p]reach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim 4:2).

---

153. Workentine, “Interview with Pastor Ben Workentine on Discipleship at St. Mark, De Pere.”

154. John Qualmann, “Discipleship at Immanuel, Greenville, Questionnaire,” Questionnaire, 26 November 2018.

155. Hein, “Discipleship at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Questionnaire.”

156. Ewart, “Interview Questionnaire: Growth Groups at Bethlehem Lakeville.”

As such, the pastor's proclamation and instruction in worship services, Bible classes, confirmation courses, and personal counselling remains an integral aspect of his service as a public minister. Yet Christ also gives called workers to his church to "equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph 4:12) – that is, to prepare God's people to handle the Word of God themselves in service to one another. Both directives – proclamation and preparation – are essential to embracing the third principle of relational discipleship.

The pastor's proclamation – his public ministry with Word and sacrament – forms the necessary foundation for relational discipleship. As discussed earlier, the Holy Spirit works through this ministry to create and strengthen faith in God's people, to make them his redeemed children and members of the body of Christ. Additionally, this work of proclaiming God's Word encompasses teaching God's will for sanctified living as the body of Christ – including exhorting Christians to love one another through their personal use of law and gospel in each other's lives. The pastor prepares God's people for the work of edifying Christ's body by preaching and teaching the underlying principles of relational discipleship – the universal priesthood and the mutual care and concern within the body of Christ. The importance of teaching these truths, of crafting a mindset, cannot be overstated given contemporary culture's push for a private faith characterized by a consumeristic attitude toward church and faith life. Reflecting on the experience of Bethlehem, Ewart comments:

One challenge was changing the culture so that people were open to creating vulnerable Christian relationships where there were previously casual "how are you doing" Sunday morning relationships. Everyone naturally drifts towards the latter because it is easier, so we are deliberate about preaching the biblical direction to have authentic Christian relationships.<sup>157</sup>

---

157. Ewart, "Interview Questionnaire: Growth Groups at Bethlehem Lakeville."

These authentic Christian relationships require purposeful, intentional effort. Ewart poses the question: “What if we could create a congregational mindset that focused more on how the people care for one another, rather than the pastor caring for everyone’s needs?”<sup>158</sup> Such a mindset and renewed culture only develops as the gospel in Word and sacrament shapes hearts and attitudes and as the pastor teaches and preaches the new life of discipleship to which Christ calls every believer.

To this end, the pastor builds on the foundation of teaching and preaching these scriptural principles with the goal of also *equipping* his people for relational discipleship. In some cases, this may begin with the pastor teaching members how to engage personally with the Word, either on their own or at home with family or within a small group. Crosswalk, for example, offers a class designed to guide new Christians in reading and meditating on God’s Word, as well as another class focused on equipping members to share their faith.<sup>159</sup> St. Mark takes a similar approach, offering a series of classes designed to guide Christians in living their faith in various life situations, such as raising children and caring for aging parents.<sup>160</sup> This very practical teaching recognizes that applying the truths of one’s status as a priest before God and one’s membership in the body of Christ often requires specific guidance, especially when the applications are countercultural or the believer is new to the faith.

The pastor also plays a key role in preparing leaders and facilitators for small groups. In some cases, this may begin by providing personal acknowledgement of a member’s gifts and encouragement to apply them. Qualmann comments, “Many people are qualified and have both

---

158. Ewart, “Interview Questionnaire: Growth Groups at Bethlehem Lakeville.”

159. Solofra, “Discipleship at CrossWalk Church, Phoenix, Questionnaire.”

160. Workentine, “Interview with Pastor Ben Workentine on Discipleship at St. Mark, De Pere.”



the social skills and Bible background/base of knowledge to lead the discussion. They just lack the confidence.”<sup>161</sup> In other situations, a pastor may do more hands-on instruction through mentoring or modeling. Workentine, for example, has formed a small group consisting of future group leaders in which he will model best practices for facilitating small groups and guiding discussion.<sup>162</sup> Once a small group is operating, the pastor continues his work of equipping by providing necessary materials (such as sermon-based studies), personal encouragement through regular contact with the facilitators, and guidance with specific challenges or situations as they arise.

The pastor plays an important role in working directly with his members in pursuit of relational discipleship. But just as importantly, the pastor’s efforts have indirect benefits; that is, his focus on structured relational discipleship within the congregation has as its aim also the development of relational discipleship habits outside of the structured environment. For example, as Christian engages with Christian in a small group, he or she gains deeper insights into how God’s truths touch all areas of life and a greater appreciation for applying those truths in the lives of others outside the group. Qualmann comments, “Growth Groups do a good job of having people living and talking about their faith. Sometimes it’s just having a great example of an individual or a couple whose genuine faith and love rub off on the rest of the group.”<sup>163</sup> Such personal interactions in the context of lived life are prime examples of the daily discipleship characteristic of Luther’s theology – the “common, ordinary ways of action in the midst of details of daily life.”<sup>164</sup> As Christians experience handling God’s Word in these structured

---

161. Qualmann, “Discipleship at Immanuel, Greenville, Questionnaire.”

162. Workentine, “Interview with Pastor Ben Workentine on Discipleship at St. Mark, De Pere.”

163. Qualmann, “Discipleship at Immanuel, Greenville, Questionnaire.”

164. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

environments, they also gain valuable experience, preparation, and encouragement for organic, countercultural relational discipleship in the daily routine of life.

Embracing these three scriptural principles of relational discipleship at a congregational level requires intentional, purposeful action. Especially in view of the messages Christians consistently receive from the surrounding culture, and in many cases from the culture of the church to which they belong, the church today must consider how to deliberately model, teach, preach, and facilitate Scripture's view of relational discipleship. To assume Christians will simply pick up on it without expressed encouragement and guidance is to fail to understand the culture which shapes them and the sinful preoccupation with self which is innate to all. As Senkbeil emphasizes, "Rather than contributing to the fracturing of human community we Christians need to concretely demonstrate how God sets the solitary in families. We need to show how the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies people one by one through the gospel, and then draws them into communion in his holy church."<sup>165</sup> In this section, I have demonstrated that small groups are one way of accomplishing this goal and can be a valuable tool for a congregation as it pursues countercultural relational discipleship.

---

165. Senkbeil, "Engaging Our Culture Faithfully," 306.

## CONCLUSION

Paul beautifully portrays the body of Christ in Ephesians 4:16: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” This is what God has designed the body of Christ to be; and through the Spirit’s power in Word and sacrament, this is who the church of God is. Naturally, in this life Christians cannot support one another with perfect mutual care and concern; and yet the body of Christ continually strives to reflect the love of its Head among its members.

It is with such striving that the church must approach the challenges of its contemporary context. As demonstrated above, modern cultural forces confronting American Christians – individualism, compartmentalization, digitally-mediated relationships, and consumerism – promote a self-orientation and private faith that works against Scripture’s vision for relational discipleship. These cultural attributes are shaping Christians in profound and irresistible ways and therefore demand an intentional, considered response. Kolb summarizes the situation well: “Today’s hearers also need what Lutherans have not needed in most of their cultural settings previously: aid within God-forsaking societies to raise up their children in the ways that they are to go, in the footsteps of Christ, when the culture no longer helps point the way but designs detours through life that derail and disorient.”<sup>166</sup> Small groups are one avenue of response and can take many and varied forms, from believers gathered for Bible study, to Christians in a peer

---

166. Kolb, “Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition.”

mentoring program, to young professionals networking and building Christian relationships. In this paper, I have demonstrated how such groups may be employed to promote relational discipleship. Certainly, Christian congregations are not limited to this one approach; indeed, any efforts designed to facilitate or improve relationships among Christians may prove valuable, such as training in communicating, active listening, and conflict management, as well as efforts geared toward helping Christians grow in their faith and apply it with one another in daily life. Christ gives his people freedom and wisdom to determine what works best in their unique contexts as they seek to carry out relational discipleship.

And yet, Christian leaders do have a responsibility – not to respond with a one-size-fits-all approach, but rather to respond *scripturally*. God has called his people to be a kingdom of priests who apply the Word of Truth in relationship with one another, in mutual care, concern, admonition, and edification. And God has also given his church called gospel workers to equip his people for such works of service. Despite the mitigating influence of contemporary culture, Scripture stills holds before the church this vision for the body of Christ in action; may the love of Christ lead God’s people to embrace it.

## APPENDIX 1. SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

### Introduction

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary requires senior students to complete an original thesis in fulfillment of the Master of Divinity degree requirements. The thesis allows the student to explore any of the four theological disciplines taught at WLS, develop insights or an original perspective on the subject, and present the findings in a written format.

I am researching the concept of “relational-discipleship” – that is, the role of individual believers in building one another up in the faith through the means of grace. The New Testament encourages this kind of concern for the body of Christ in various places, including:

- Ephesians 4:11-12 (“... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up”);
- Colossians 3:16 (“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly”); and
- Hebrews 3:12-13 (“... encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness”), among many others.

My research is particularly focused on how aspects of modern *culture* may be interfering with the type of Christian relational-discipleship described in the Scriptures, and how the church can respond at a congregational level. Your answers to the below questions will be very helpful in this research process.

### Consent

Your answers to the following questions may be quoted or summarized, in whole or in part, in the completed student thesis. The thesis becomes a permanent record of scholarly work once it is completed. As such, all manuscripts completed in partial fulfillment of the MDiv degree become part of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary’s library collection and are available to the public on the seminary website. ***Please type your initials in the box below to indicate your agreement to this use of your questionnaire responses.***

I agree to the above described use of my responses in this questionnaire.

### Questionnaire

*Please provide an answer to the following questions. Thank you!*

**Note:** “Small group” or “small groups” below can refer to any church-organized gathering of believers outside of corporate worship intended to encourage growth in faith, provide mutual support as the body of Christ, or give expression of Christian fellowship. “Small group” logically

*implies more than one person, but for purposes of these questions there is no assumed maximum number of participants in any group.*

*Examples of small groups include, but are not limited to, one-on-one mentoring, small group Bible Study, Christian support groups, Christian service groups, and Christian fellowship/friendship groups.*

***As you answer the below, please interpret “small group” widely to encompass anything that focuses on relational discipleship.***

### ***Background***

1. Please briefly describe Immanuel’s overall discipleship/nurturing efforts. How do small groups (and particularly the relational aspect of such groups) fit into these/complement them?
  
2. Please provide a brief summary of the various small groups at Immanuel. Please also comment on the degree to which these are led/facilitated by lay members or called workers.
  
3. What perceived need prompted the implementation of small groups at Immanuel? How was the need determined/discovered/identified?
  
4. When did Immanuel first launch small groups?
  
5. What Scriptural guidelines or principles did you follow when designing the small group ministry model?
  
6. What template (if any) did you use or modify for the design of your small groups?

### ***Outcomes***

1. What percentage of members participate in small groups? (If you have data by year, that would be fantastic – otherwise the most recent data would work too.)

2. How has God blessed Immanuel through this ministry model? How were those blessings gauged or measured?
3. What challenges did you encounter/are you encountering in implementing this model? How did you address them?
4. How have you determined and measured the “success” of the small groups? What are the results?
5. Can you share data on what percentage of members continue in one small group or another over the course of a year?
6. How integral are small groups to new member assimilation and discipleship?
7. What role have small groups played in evangelism?
8. How have small groups influenced member use of the means of grace, both personally and relationally with one another?
9. Small groups provide a designed, structured opportunity for Christian fellowship. Have Christian relationships grown organically as a result? If so, please describe.
10. How important has the concept of “accountability” been?
11. My research includes evaluating the impact of modern, western culture on relational discipleship. In particular, I am focusing on the cultural aspects of individualism (vs. collectivism), the tendency to compartmentalize religion from the other parts of life, consumerism, and the substitute of modern communication methods (via the Internet, texting,

etc.) for in-person interaction. Have you observed these cultural characteristics as challenges to the success of small groups? Have small groups been successful at responding to these cultural characteristics? If so, how?

12. What other cultural challenges, either from outside the church or from within (church culture), have small groups been effective at addressing?
  
13. Are you aware of any other WELS (or other Christian) churches that are intentionally focusing on relational discipleship that might be a good source for additional research?



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arndt, William, and Frederick W. Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Barna, George. *America at the Crossroads: Explosive Trends Shaping America's Future and What You Can Do about It*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2016.
- Barna Group, ed. *Barna Trends 2017: What's New and What's Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2016.
- Brittain, Christopher. "Plague on Both Their Houses: The Real Story of Growth and Decline in Liberal and Conservative Churches." *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 8 May 2013.  
<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/plague-on-both-their-houses-the-real-story-of-growth-and-decline/10099862>.
- Camp, Lee C. *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2008.
- Coleman, Robert E. *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Spire, 2010.
- Dean, William Walter. *A Church at Risk: The Encroachment of American Culture upon the Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich: F. Asbury Press, 1990.
- Eims, Leroy. *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978.
- Elton, Terri Martinson. "The Story We Find Ourselves in: Nurturing Christian Identity in a Consumer Culture." *Word World* 34.2 (2014): 168–77.
- Ewart, Matt. "Interview Questionnaire: Growth Groups at Bethlehem Lakeville." Questionnaire, 5 November 2018.
- Graham, Elaine. "Luther's Legacy: Rethinking the Theology of Lay Discipleship 500 Years after the Reformation." *Ecclesiology* 13.3 (2017): 324–48.
- Hanks, Billie, and William A Shell. *Discipleship: The Best Writings from the Most Experienced Disciple Makers*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1981.
- Hein, James. "Discipleship at St. Marcus, Milwaukee, Questionnaire." Questionnaire, 2 November 2018.

- Hipps, Shane. *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church*. El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2005.
- Hong, Stephen A. "Reversing a Downward Spiral: Strengthening the Church's Community, Holiness and Unity through Intentional Discipleship." *Asian J. Pentecostal Stud.* 15.1 (2012): 89–125.
- Hopman, Nicholas. "Giving Up the ...Ship: Classical Lutheran Piety versus Discipleship." *The Cresset* 78.5 (2015): 50–53.
- Horton, Michael Scott. *Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014.
- Jethani, Skye. "The Unholy Trinity of Consumerism." *Cult. Encount.* 6.1 (2010): 79–85.
- Kinnaman, David, and Gabe Lyons. *Good Faith: Being a Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2016.
- Kolb, Robert. "Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition." *Concordia Theology*, 26 March 2012. <https://concordiatheology.org/2012/03/discipleship-in-the-lutheran-tradition/>.
- . "Parents Should Explain the Sermon: Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent." *Lutheran Q.* 25.3 (1973): 231–40.
- Luther, Martin. *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences: October 31, 1517*. Electronic ed. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1996.
- Malphurs, Aubrey. *Maximizing Your Effectiveness: How to Discover and Develop Your Divine Design*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2006.
- Mattes, Mark C. "Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective." *Lutheran Q.* 26.2 (2012): 142–63.
- Mattes, Mark C. "Properly Distinguishing Law and Gospel as the Pastor's Calling." *Logia* 24.1 (2015): 37–46.
- McNeal, Reggie. *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*. 1st ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Moon, W. Jay. *Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation*. Encountering Mission. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017.
- Myers, Bryant L. *Engaging Globalization: The Poor, Christian Mission, and Our Hyperconnected World*. Mission in Global Community. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017.
- Paustian, Mark A. "Unleashing Our Calling: Today's Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocations," 2006. <http://essays.wls.wels.net/handle/123456789/3616>.

- Qualmann, John. "Discipleship at Immanuel, Greenville, Questionnaire." Questionnaire, 26 November 2018.
- Senkbeil, Harold L. "Engaging Our Culture Faithfully." *Concordia J.* 40.4 (2014): 292–314.
- Solofra, Dan. "Discipleship at CrossWalk Church, Phoenix, Questionnaire." Questionnaire, 28 November 2018.
- Valleskey, David J. "Outreach Challenges Facing the WELS in the 21st Century." *Wis. Lutheran Q.* 98.2 (2001): 83–96.
- Veith, Gene Edward. *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*. Focal Point Series. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2002.
- Wilson, E.L. *The Abiding Word*. Edited by Theodore Laetsch. Vol. 1. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1953.
- Workentine, Ben. "Interview with Pastor Ben Workentine on Discipleship at St. Mark, De Pere." Telephone, 7 December 2018.
- "About." *Eden Project Communities*, 31 October 2016.  
<https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/about>.
- "Charles Grandison Finney & the Second Phase of the Second Great Awakening." *Christian History | Learn the History of Christianity & the Church*, 1989.  
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-23/charles-grandison-finney-second-phase-of-second-great.html>.
- "Country Comparison - UK." *Hofstede Insights*, n.d. <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/the-uk/>.
- "Country Comparison - US." *Hofstede Insights*, n.d. <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/the-usa/>.
- "National Culture." *Hofstede Insights*, n.d. <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/models/national-culture/>.
- "New Research on the State of Discipleship." *Barna Group*, n.d.  
<https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>.
- "Overview of Bethlehem Growth Group System," n.d.
- "The Big Impact | Eden Project Communities," n.d.  
<https://www.edenprojectcommunities.com/the-big-impact>.