MISSIONAL COMMUNITY AS A MODEL FOR INTEGRATED DISCIPLESHIP IN AN AMERICAN CONTEXT

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by

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APPROVAL SHEET

MISSIONAL COMMUNITY AS A MODEL
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To Olivia, Micah, Hudson, Emmaline, and Owen, and all the partners of The Austin Stone Community Church, may this project continue to be lived out in our daily lives as we pursue Jesus together.

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PREFACE

The writing that follows in this project is the result of the contributions of many people over the course of numerous years. I first must acknowledge the faithful partners of The Austin Stone Community Church who are living the ideas presented in this work. Their stories have contributed far more learning than some of the academic sources quoted in this work. The Austin Stone is truly an amazing community committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Word of God, and obeying the Spirit in everyday life.

Kevin Peck, the Lead Pastor of The Austin Stone, and Matt Carter, the Pastor of Preaching at The Austin Stone, graciously encouraged me to crystallize these thoughts and pursue the opportunity for doctoral work. These men faithfully lead our church forward into obedience to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit and faithfully lead me into obedience as a disciple. In addition, Michael Stewart, Dave Barrett, Halim Suh, Jon Dansby, and Tyler David have all had tremendous influence on the thinking and practice of missional communities advocated below. Each has contributed key ideas through discussion and suggested reading, as well as helped to make theology practical for the local church.

I am also indebted to Dan Dumas and Michael Wilder for fostering the learning of our doctoral cohort and providing keen insight into this project along the way. Both have contributed significantly to the clarity and consistency of the arguments presented, and each has uniquely influenced my view of the church.

Finally, I am grateful to my family – Olivia, Micah, Hudson, Emmaline and Owen – who have walked through these ideas both in theory and in practice. Olivia has constantly challenged my thoughts with Scripture, and kept my ideas grounded in real life

discipleship. Our children constantly ask me questions, and although some of what is written here will be unintelligible for them until well into the future, much of the simplicity that follows results from trying to explain ideas to them. May the culture our children inhabit be more reflective of the kingdom of God because of the faithful witness of our church in the years to come.

Todd Randall Engstrom

Austin, Texas

May 2014

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to argue that missional communities present a compelling integrated model of discipleship in American culture.

Goals

This project will have five main goals in arguing the primary thesis. The first goal will be to examine the underlying worldview of American culture, particularly as it pertains to consumerism, materialism, and individualism. These themes will be explored and discussed with reference to culture both inside and outside of the church in America. The second goal of this project is to explore the theological underpinnings of missional communities. In particular, I will look at the soteriological foundations of a believer's identity in Christ and then proceed to apply those doctrines in the framework of ecclesiology.

The third goal of the project is to show the need for a church to have a strategic approach to discipleship and to present a framework for a tri-perspectival approach to discipleship.[1] The fourth goal of this project will be to apply practically the preceding work into a definition of a missional community and a communal framework for discipleship practices.

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[1]Tri-perspectival discipleship approaches the transformation of all the faculties of a human – the knowledge of the head, the affections of the heart, and the obedience of the hands.

Ministry Context

In December of 2002, Matt Carter moved from The Woodlands, Texas to Austin, Texas to plant The Austin Stone Community Church. The church began as a small Bible study in Carter's living room and rapidly began to grow after the public launch. God has been faithful to that initial vision to keep Christ and his gospel the focus of our church community and to keep The Austin Stone firmly fixed upon on the Word of God. Over time, the strategies of The Austin Stone have been refined, but the heart of the church has never wavered from our original mission.

The mission statement of The Austin Stone is "to be a New Testament church existing for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ."[2] The vision of The Austin Stone is "to build a great city, renewed and redeemed by a gospel movement, by being a church for the city of Austin that labors to advance the gospel throughout the nations."[3] These statements form the foundation for the ministry and strategy of The Austin Stone Community Church and continue to guide her into the future.

The Austin Stone currently has six campuses in four locations around the Austin metro area. The first two campuses regularly gather in downtown Austin at Stephen F. Austin High School, both in the morning and the evening. The third and fourth campuses are housed in our permanent facility which doubles as a multi-use non-profit center called The For the City Center. This facility was opened in the fall of 2009. The fifth campus is located in at O'Henry Middle School, as the result of a merger with Austin Bible Fellowship in 2011. The sixth campus is located in south Austin at Paredes Middle School and was launched publicly in January of 2013.

In addition to our multiple campuses, The Austin Stone Community Church is committed to several things that distinguish the culture of our leadership and our church.

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[2]The Austin Stone Community Church, "Identity and Beliefs," http://austinstone.org/about/identity-beliefs (accessed February 24, 2014).

[3]The Austin Stone Community Church, "Identity and Beliefs."

In order to provide further understanding of the ministry context, the cultural values of The Austin Stone's leadership are articulated below, as excerpted from our annual staff review.

Worship on Sundays

The leaders of The Austin Stone believe that God has moved and will move through the gathering of his saints in corporate worship on the Lord's Day. Worship is ultimate, not mission. Therefore, Sundays are primarily about worship for believers. Mission exists because there are still places where worship does not and because there are yet more worshippers to gather.[4] So, the leaders of The Austin Stone want to love to worship with the rest of the church. Each leader's role in the church should feel like a calling rather than a job and should bring about a delight to worship together. This means that each of the leaders of The Austin Stone tries as much as possible to gather when and where the church gathers to participate in worship opportunities and events. On Sundays, though the leaders at The Austin Stone may have duties for one or more worship services, they will still find a way to participate in worship for at least one of those services.

Missional Community

Being a "missional community" is a defining attribute of the people of God. He purchased his people to be a family that is on mission. The community context is the theological thread that runs through everything that the leaders at The Austin Stone do. Our most important community will form around our pursuit of mission and discipleship with others. To gain a friend, one has to be a friend. To keep a friend one has to be on mission with that friend.

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[4]This idea was popularized by John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (1993; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

Unreached Peoples

God has called the church to reach every tribe, tongue, and nation with the good news of the gospel, and when the Great Commission is accomplished, Christ will return, and believers—the church—will go to heaven for eternity with Christ. So while one absolutely seeks to reach those already in front of them, the leaders at The Austin Stone place a priority on those who are not yet reached. Because of this conviction, we invest primarily into strategic places and then secondarily into the calling of the missionary.

Discipleship and Servant Body

The Austin Stone is served by leaders and led by servants and thus is a discipleship structure before it is an organizational structure. The leaders at The Austin Stone do not hire people to be ministers; they hire people "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12). This means that the leadership of The Austin Stone do not use people to complete tasks but use tasks as a context for making disciples of people who make more disciples.

Leaders Among Equals

Jesus gave the church a plurality of leadership. His Twelve jointly led and taught the first community of Christians together. In much the same way, the leaders of The Austin Stone pattern their organization around a collective and collaborative leadership structure where each elder shares the authority and responsibility with others in the office to which they are called. While Jesus shared leadership with his disciples, he clearly was their leader. A tribal structure such as this requires a great deal of humility in recognizing what Paul defines as the principle of leadership among equals (1 Tim 5:17). One must recognize that none of us are equal in their giftedness, experience, knowledge, or leadership ability. Thus, the leaders of The Austin Stone honor those whom God has called to greater leadership, and they practice mutual submission as they humbly allow

others to lead just as they are willing humbly to lead others in the areas of their leadership.

Gospel Justice/Gospel Mission

As the saints of God are sent into God's mission, they are also called to be a people of mercy because God is a God of mercy. The leaders of The Austin Stone feed, clothe, and help others not only so that they will know Jesus but because the leaders of The Austin Stone want to act like their merciful God. Social justice is mercy without the gospel. Mission without mercy is hypocritical. Gospel justice requires both mission and mercy, both declaration and demonstration of the kingdom to one's neighbors, to one another other, and to one's city.

Work Hard and Rest Well

The leaders of The Austin Stone work hard because this ministry is the calling of their lives, but the leaders of The Austin Stone also rest well in obedient confession of their weakness through weekly Sabbath rest. The leaders of The Austin Stone seek to rest well from their work just as Christians rest in the power of Christ that is made perfect in their weaknesses. There is then an emphasis on diligence about observing Sabbath to renew and restore one physically (Exod 4:10) and for God to bless one spiritually (Exod 4:8).

Concluding Remarks on Ministry Context

The story summarized earlier and the values articulated above for the leadership of The Austin Stone provide an overview of the story and driving motivations for the church. Although this project will primarily focus on the second value of missional community, it cannot be abstracted completely from the context of the wider church culture. While missional communities are fundamental to how The Austin Stone pursues church, they are one portion of a comprehensive vision to become a church

driven by the New Testament.

Challenges and Complexities

Challenges and complexities abound when advancing a model for discipleship, and biblical fidelity to the task of discipleship is the first of these challenges. The model proposed in this project is designed to be practiced within the context of a church that preaches the gospel of Jesus and the Bible faithfully, pursues a robust biblical ecclesiology, and is committed to reaching the lost. The model cannot be extracted from that context lest it run the risk of being incomplete. Additionally, great complexities exist in reducing something as broad and deep as soteriology into a few simple words. While the words selected are expounded and clarified in meaning, they run the risk of not carrying the complete meaning and weight of their intention. Without a robust ecclesiology and soteriology, pursuing the model of missional communities advocated runs the risk of pursuing an incomplete picture of discipleship as the New Testament instructs. Particular attention will be paid to certain aspects of soteriology and ecclesiology to reinforce missing elements of discipleship in the landscape of American churches, but emphasis should never lead to exclusion of the fullness of doctrine and practice.

Rationale

The rationale for the project is that few discipleship and community resources are available that advance an integrated model of communal discipleship that are at the same time robustly theological and practical. While small group life remains an essential component of the modern church, very little analysis and thoughtfulness exists on a popular level that explores the critical role that culture plays in these communities. To a relative extent, missional communities have presented an effective way to disciple in American culture, and yet little has been written to communicate these ideas and

practices for the broader church.

Definitions, Limitations and Delimitations

The word that will need the most clarity for this project will be "missional community." There is no agreed upon definition for a missional community, but several have been advanced. Jeff Vanderstelt, a leader in the missional community movement, defines a missional community as "a family of missionary servants who make disciples who make disciples."[5] Alternatively, Neil Cole, a proponent of organic churches and missional communities, says a missional community is "a spiritual family (community) with the Spirit of Christ in their midst, called out to join Him on His mission to the ends of the earth."[6] Mike Breen, the leader of 3DM ministries and a leader in the missional community conversation, defines a missional community as "a group of 20 to 50 people who exist, in Christian community, to reach either a particular neighborhood or network of relationships."[7]

While there are more definitions for a missional community, the aforementioned represent the central ideas that shape the conversation. The Austin Stone defines a missional community as a community of Christ followers on mission with God in obedience to the Holy Spirit that demonstrates tangibly and declares creatively the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a specific pocket of people. This definition will be constructed and explored more fully in chapter 5 of this work.

A significant limitation of this project is that the proposed model has only been

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[5]Jeff Vanderstelt, "What Is a Missional Community," *Desiring God* (August 10, 2011), http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/what-is-a-missional-community (accessed February 24, 2014).

[6]Neil Cole, "What Is A Missional Community?" *Verge Network* (December 29, 2010), http://www.vergenetwork.org/2010/12/29/neil-cole-what-is-a-missional-community-printable/ (accessed February 24, 2014).

[7]Mike Breen, "What Is A Missional Community?" *Verge Network* (December 31, 2010), http://www.vergenetwork.org/2010/12/31/mike-breen-what-is-a-missional-community-printable/ (accessed February 24, 2014).

extensively practiced in the context of The Austin Stone since 2009. While the theology advanced is timeless, the practices consistent with that theology remain relatively unproven in a wide context. The delimitation of this project is that the cultural context of application is primarily oriented towards an American church context.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter 1 will provide an understanding of the purpose and goals of the project as well as a brief survey of The Austin Stone Community Church. Chapter 2 will explore the predominant model of small groups in the American church and their potential limitations in light of gospel movements. Chapter 3 will examine the underlying worldview of American culture, particularly as it pertains to consumerism, materialism and individualism. Several different perspectives and implications of these idolatries will be explored. The primary authors referenced will be David Wells, James Davison Hunter, Vincent Miller and Joseph Hellermen. Chapter 4 will explore the theological underpinnings of missional communities. A survey of traditional Systematic Theology with respect to four doctrines – Election, Regeneration, Sanctification and Adoption – will provide the foundation of the new identity of a Christian. Finally, these doctrines will be tied into ecclesiology. Authors consulted will be Gregg Allison, Wayne Grudem, Louis Berkhof, and Stanley Grenz.

Chapter 5 will present a strategic approach to discipleship, develop a framework for a tri-perspectival approach to discipleship, and illustrate how missional communities can integrate the model over an extended period of time. Finally, Chapter 6 will practically apply the preceding work into a definition of missional communities and a communal framework for discipleship practices.

CHAPTER 2

SMALL GROUPS AND THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN DISCIPLESHIP

Introduction

Cultivating leaders, disciples, and communities for movement in a North American context requires understanding two foundational ideas: (1) What are the primary starting points for potential leaders in a cultural context? (2) What would faithful leadership and disciple-making look like in a cultural context? This project will seek to respond to the second question by arguing that missional communities offers an integrated discipleship model for moving those in the care of the local church from the consumerist mentality toward the sacrificial missionary life. To explain this, I will expound a theology of community from Scripture, present a philosophy of ministry that critiques and challenges dominant cultural presuppositions found mostly in the West, and offer a set of practices that reinforce the theology and philosophy.

The ideas and practices proposed below have been tested extensively in the context of The Austin Stone Community Church in Austin, Texas. The primary reason for undertaking this project is to understand the current climate of many American churches and provide tangible discipleship steps for cultivating disciple-making communities who will form the backbone for a movement in North America. A true movement of the gospel is going to require multiplying churches, multiplying communities, and most importantly, multiplying disciples of Jesus Christ.

Biblically speaking, Christ could not have been clearer about the mission of the church: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have

commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20).[1] Gregg Allison speaks to this issue:

> As devoted disciples of Jesus Christ, Christians have an added dimension of responsibility that goes well beyond the divinely given cultural mandate. They are also given the 'Great Commandment' (Matt. 22:37–38) and the 'Great Commission' (28:19–20); thus, loving neighbors and making disciples are responsibilities incumbent on Christ-followers. These specifically and uniquely Christian endeavors do not replace the cultural mandate to engage in civilization building, but are in addition to that basic human endeavor. And the church shows its members how to obediently and faithfully carry out these responsibilities.[2]

The scope of the Great Commission is clear: all nations. The command is to make disciples, and the clarification of the command to make disciples is to baptize and to teach to obey. In many ways, the American church consists of many who have been taught the good news of the gospel but are lacking in the obedience to the commands of Christ. One needs simply to look at how many individuals fill North American church gatherings, and yet how few American believers have actually obeyed the fundamental command to make a disciple. If the hallmark of obedience to the Great Commission is making disciples, then the American church is indeed quite unhealthy. In order to make disciples who obey the Great Commission and in turn reproduce disciples themselves, it is critically important to think deeply about the average person attending any given church as well as the surrounding culture.

Why Pursue This Project?

"What if the church was the missionary?" This profound question, posed by Bob Roberts in his book *Transformation*, catalyzed a deep and critical investigation of all facets of the church community at The Austin Stone and resulted in sweeping changes to how its people minister in the city of Austin, Texas.[3] Perhaps most significantly, it altered

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[1]All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

[2]Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), Kindle ed., loc. 12290–94.

[3]See Bob Roberts, *Transformation: How Glocal Churches Transform Lives and the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

the course of how The Austin Stone approaches small communities in the life of the church and resulted in a drastic shift toward engaging a large church in the mission of making disciples as small communities. Where the church once ran "small groups," it is now fully engaged in cultivating authentic, biblical, gospel-centered, incarnational, and missional communities. In short, The Austin Stone is aiming at being all that God has called the church to be in the every day rhythms of life. Although there is much more work to be done, what follows is an account of how God changed The Austin Stone's thinking about, feeling for, and actions in community life together.

The Need for Community

Like many churches, The Austin Stone Community Church has a very clear understanding of what it believes God has called them to do. It phrases its mission this way: "To be a New Testament church existing for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ."[4] Through years of experience, prayer, and study, The Austin Stone has gained a clearer understanding of what it means to be the church in the city of Austin and accomplish this mission. The vision is now this: "To build a great city, renewed and redeemed by a gospel movement, by being a church for the city of Austin that labors to advance the gospel throughout the nations."[5]

As the leadership of the church has mulled over that mission and vision, they have been consistently pressed to consider that there are pockets of people throughout Austin and the nations who have not been renewed and redeemed by the gospel. According to the 2013 Barna Cities report, 91 percent of the population in the city of Austin would agree that religious faith is important to them.[6] However, only 27 percent

[4]The Austin Stone Community Church, "Identity and Beliefs," http://austinstone.org/about/identity-beliefs, (accessed March 8, 2014).

[5]Ibid.

[6]Barna Group, "Austin: A Profile of Residents of the Greater Austin Area, 2013 Edition," http://toddengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/2013-barna-cities-austin-tx1.pdf (accessed February

of the population actively practiced their faith on a week-to-week basis, and only 14 percent of the city would say they are "captive Christians," meaning they meet all of the following criteria: they consider themselves Christian; they describe themselves as very committed to the Christian faith; they have read from the Bible outside of a church service in the past seven days; they have prayed to God within the past seven days; they have attended church within the past seven days; they believe their religious faith is very important in their life today; they hold an orthodox view of God; they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ; and they believe they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus as their savior.[7]

Clearly a church who gathers on Sunday to proclaim God's Word and the gospel can be successful in Austin, but according to Lifeway Research's study of Austin in 2010, 38 percent of people in Austin attend a Protestant church on a monthly basis, and of the 62 percent that do not, over half would likely not come to a church service if invited.[8] Austin is a unique context in which to be the church. Much of the city would self-identify as Christian, yet few are actively engaging their faith. Many more people in the city of Austin would not even consider entering the door of a Sunday worship service. The city of Austin desperately needs the proclamation of Jesus and the demonstration of God's kingdom in everyday life. The church has a responsibility to meet people where they are and help them follow Jesus.

The church indeed has a large task in Austin, but has challenges of her own. In a survey of the churches of Austin, 90 percent responded that they "challenge members to build significant relationships with people who are non-Christians," but also responded

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24, 2014).

[7]Ibid.

[8]Lifeway Christian Research, "Greater Austin Benchmark Study" (2010), http://toddengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/2010-Greater-Austin-Research-Study1.ppt (accessed March 8, 2014).

the two most effective means of engaging lost people was through outreach events and service.[9] While the church says it is equipping saints to share their faith individually, they rely on organized events for effective evangelism. While church leaders invest in individuals to share the gospel in everyday life, they still trust in events they put together as the most effective evangelistic tool. Either the message of everyday Christians engaging in mission is not being heard, or something is flawed in the ministry design for equipping the saints. When posed with these particular challenges, The Austin Stone realized that it had to adapt some of the church's core ministries if it was ever going to see a movement of multiplying disciples, communities, and churches.

Historically, small relational networks have had a significant impact in movements. Historian Herbert Butterfield says it this way:

> The strongest organizational unit in the world's history would appear to be that which we call a cell because it is a remorseless self-multiplier; is exceptionally difficult to destroy; can preserve its intensity of local life while vast organizations quickly wither when they are weakened at the center; can defy the power of governments; is the appropriate lever of prying open any status quo. Whether we take early Christianity or sixteenth century Calvinism or modern communism, this seems the appointed way by which a mere handful of people may open up a new chapter in the history of civilization.[10]

Communities of people play an integral role in movements, especially in church-planting and disciple-making movements. Movements are not isolated, individualistic phenomena, but rather emerge from an environment where "everyone gets to play," as Alan Hirsch says.[11]

Additionally, community is an integral part of life together as Christians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs

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[9]Ibid.

[10]Herbert Butterfield, quoted in William Beckham, *The Two Winged Church Will Fly* (Houston: Touch Publications, 1993), 119.

[11]See Alan Hirsch, *The Permanent Revolution: Aposotlic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

> him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth. He needs his brother man as a bearer and proclaimer of the divine word of salvation. He needs his brother solely because of Jesus Christ. The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure.[12]

If the small community is the backbone of movements, and if community is essential to walking through life as a Christian, the church would be foolish not to incorporate this form into the rhythms and practices of discipleship and gathering as the church.

In addition to these two ideas above, there also is a pervasive need for community in both the American culture at large and the American church. People in today's culture are increasingly isolated and possess a felt need for community, as Robert Putnam points out in his book entitled *Bowling Alone*.[13] Continued isolation is evidenced by a significant disintegration of civic and fraternal organizations (i.e., Women's Clubs and Shriners) that once were the bedrock for American communal involvement. This loss of community has been to our detriment as a society. If history, theology, and sociology all testify to the importance of the small communities of individuals, the church would be wise to give careful thought to them.

Small Group Movement

The American church has not been ignorant of the power, necessity, and urgency of small communities. The church has certainly identified the need for community over the past 50 years and sought to respond. The small group has become the preferred and often unquestioned method of discipleship in the American church over this short time relative to church history. Several contemporary volumes have been written on the importance of connection, belonging, and community. Authors like Steve Gladen, Eddie Mosely, Brad House, Heather Zempel, and many others address the topic

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[12]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 23.

[13]Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

of community from a variety of perspectives.[14] Most often, small groups are touted as the answer to the problem of connection in the church, the best context for discipleship, and an integral ministry within the church. Other thinkers take different approaches. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow poses the idea that small groups are attempting to provide substitutes for the loss of community.[15] Whether on the popular level or the academic level, interest in the role of small communities in the life of the church and society as a whole is certainly high.

One besetting challenge for the general community who writes, speaks, and thinks on these kinds of communities is rallying around a definition. Randall Neighbour defines a small group in this way: "A healthy small group is comprised of 3-12 persons who have chosen to live together in biblical community for the purposes of Christ-centered worship, edification, relational evangelism, and discipleship."[16] Although imperfect, this definition captures the basics of most viewpoints on small groups. These kinds of groups come with many different names – cell groups, care groups, community groups, home groups, etc. – and are quite pervasive throughout the American evangelical church. Some have recognized as many as ten prevailing models of small groups in the American church.[17] Each has a distinct approach with different advantages and disadvantages, yet all would trumpet the value and necessity of a small group of individuals doing "life together" in addition to participation in regular corporate worship.

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[14]See Brad House, *Community: Taking Your Small Group Off Life Support* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Steve Gladen, *Small Groups with Purpose: How to Create Healthy Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013); Eddie Mosely, *Connecting in Communities: Understanding the Dynamics of Small Groups* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2011); Heather Zempel, *Community is Messy: The Perils and Promise of Small Group Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012).

[15]Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1994).

[16]Randall Neighbour, *The Naked Truth about Small Group Ministry: When It Won't Work and What to Do about It* (Houston: Touch Publications, 2009), Kindle ed., loc. 84–85.

[17]"Small Group Models," http://www.smallgroups.com/start/models/ (accessed August 20, 2013).

Small Groups at The Austin Stone

As church planters in the early 2000s, the team at The Austin Stone read widely and deeply about the role of community. Early on in the life of the church, leadership knew that they were "supposed" to have smaller communities where Christians could "do life together." They read Acts 2, spent time with churches who excelled at small groups, and had individuals and teams who were passionate about leading the church into life in community. They celebrated the establishment of groups, exhorted people to participate in life in community, and continued to cast vision about the authentic life of a disciple of Jesus and the idyllic nature of Christian community.

After a few years, the leadership team decided to take stock of these communities. What were they actually producing? Through a number of conversations, the team concluded that these small groups were struggling with a sense of community, and engagement in mission was virtually non-existent. Conversations with other leaders in the small group movement also fostered doubt regarding the effectiveness of the traditional model. Many leaders in the church had led groups or participated in groups, but were not doing so any longer. A sneaking suspicion emerged that The Austin Stone, as well as many churches around the country, were selling small groups but did not really believe deeply in them. Many people had an impactful experience in community at one point or another but over time grew weary of that night of the week when we had to pack up the kids, go engage in some small talk, do a Bible study, share some superficial prayer requests, and then go home.

Problems with Small Groups

That last sentence is a bit of a caricature of Christian community, but for many leaders of this generation, it probably rings true. Why do so many pastors and leaders talk about the essential nature of community, but so rarely practice the normative form of community they advocate in their local congregations? There are a host of reasons, but

most pastors intuitively know that the predominant form of community practiced in their churches is just a shadow of the real thing.

Randall Neighbour, a leading voice in the small groups and cell church movement, points out this problem:

> While many American churches are growing numerically when counting noses on Sunday morning, I consistently hear comments such as, "No one wants to lead a group because they're too busy" or "We can't seem to get our cell groups to focus on reaching unchurched people for Christ" or "Our small group ministry just isn't growing like other churches we read about." One might think this malady is only found in smaller, struggling churches. Not so! America's largest churches are not seeing their small groups multiply naturally through relationships. Most increase the number of groups with hastily formed collections of interested strangers. As a nation of church leaders desiring true biblical community, we've got a big problem with small groups.[18]

Additionally, Thomas Bergler points out that small groups are flawed because they cultivate the idea that personal opinion and theology are equally important:

> Other studies support the idea that membership in a church-based small group often encourages people to value relational intimacy and practical application of their faith more than formal theology or denominational loyalty. Small groups do help people learn about their faith. But sometimes this way of learning encourages people to think that their opinions are every bit as important as what the Bible or the church teaches. The discussion format may sometimes reinforce the idea that all theological beliefs are a matter of personal preference.[19]

There is indeed a problem in most churches with respect to community, and the church definitely needs a response. Over the last few years of ministry practice and study, I am increasingly convinced that small groups as they are popularly conceived within the American church are not suited for the task of biblical discipleship.

Community as an Event

So what is the problem? Why are so many pastors unconvinced, frustrated, and uninspired when it comes to the practice of small groups? Primarily this is a result of the

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[18]Neighbour, *The Naked Truth*, loc. 42–46.

[19]Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), Kindle ed., loc. 31–13.

predominant paradigm that community is an event someone attends, not a set of relationships formed around Christ. Events are easy to measure, easy to cultivate, and easy to sell. Relationships are a much trickier thing, involving real people with real problems and real lives. Could it be that "simplifying" community to attendance at a small group event created a much larger problem than the small group was intended to solve?

Randall Neighbour's assessment seems correct: "Why do small groups so frequently not work in the West? The answer is rather obvious: the members of the groups are consumers. They do not currently possess a passion for God or for those for whom his Son died. Therefore, small groups aren't a structure that the members value. It requires them to produce."[20] The major problem with explicitly or implicitly shaping a paradigm of community around an event has been the cultivation of disciples who have exchanged the complexity and difficultly of genuine life together for the simplicity and superficiality of a shared hour during the week. This is producing similarly shallow disciples of Jesus.

Oversimplifying the Problem and Solution

When one biblical concept, like biblical community, whether intentionally or unintentionally, capitulates to culture, the results show in the lives of the disciples in a particular church. Because the bar for discipleship has been lowered, and total submission to the authoritative Word of God is softened, the health of disciples and communities slowly declines. Among church leaders, it is difficult to find someone who is excited about the state of the church in America today. Most voices are calling for a change because the church is in steady decline nationally, the culture of the nation is increasingly pluralistic, and more churches die than are planted each year. Many people think the

[20]Neighbour, *The Naked Truth*, loc.106–8.

church needs to readjust its posture to mission, but that is not a complete answer to the problem. Without thinking deeply about the culture that they inhabit, and particularly the desires and thoughts that drive much of that culture's collective behavior, leaders will continue to provide overly simplified solutions to overly simplified problems.

The Problem of the Heart

Simultaneous to the conversation above, there has been a great resurgence of gospel-centered preaching in the church today. This kind of biblical, expositional preaching seeks specifically to teach the Scriptures, to show the majesty of Christ's work, and to explain how the gospel addresses the heart of the believer and the unbeliever. The state of community and small groups is in desperate need of a similar revolution. The heart of the problem in group-life has not been properly diagnosed, nor has the power of the gospel been advanced as the solution. To get to the heart of the problem, the idolatry of American culture must be addressed – what do the collective hearts of many Americans desire more than Jesus? The church has been preaching and modeling the gospel-centered life for 2,000 years, and each generation and culture brings its own set of idolatries that must be dealt with through the lens of the Word of God.

What is Needed?

The ineffectiveness of the church would suggest that church leaders have failed to challenge the culture sufficiently. Before the culture is challenged, it must be understood. Understanding the culture in which Americans live, and especially the underlying idolatry of their worldview, is crucial to effectively making disciples in the church. Leaders and thinkers in the church have a responsibility to consider how to disciple thoughtfully and in an integrated way. As David Wells says, rather than catering to the worldview, the church must respond deeply and strategically:

> To put the matter succinctly: those who see only the contemporaneity of this spirituality — and who, typically, yearn to be seen as being contemporary —

> usually make tactical maneuvers to win a hearing for their Christian views; those who see its underlying worldview will not. Inevitably, those enamored by its contemporaneity will find that with each new tactical repositioning they are drawn irresistibly into the vortex of what they think is merely contemporary but what, in actual fact, also has the power to contaminate their faith. What they should be doing is thinking strategically, not tactically. To do so is to begin to see how ancient this spirituality actually is and to understand that beneath many contemporary styles, tastes, and habits there are also encountered rival worldviews. When rival worldviews are in play, it is not adaptation that is called for but confrontation: confrontation not of a behavioral kind which is lacking in love but of a cognitive kind which holds forth 'the truth in love.' (Eph. 4:15)[21]

So leaders must have a thoughtful, strategic response. As Hellerman says:

> Much has been written in recent years about creating community in the local church. The good news is that we do not need to create community. Indeed, we could not do so even if we wanted to. God has already created His community by saving us into His eternal family. We already are, for better or worse, brothers and sisters in Christ. Our problem is that we do not often enjoy the kind of community that we sense we should as people who are family in God's eyes. To reframe the issue in theological terms, our relational reality falls far short of our positional reality, where the horizontal aspect of the Christian life is concerned.[22]

To respond only strategically would be insufficient – leaders must respond both strategically and theologically to disciple well.

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[21]David Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), Kindle ed., loc. 2441–48.

[22]Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2009), 175–76.

CHAPTER 3

THE IDOLATRY OF AMERICAN CULTURE

As argued in the previous chapter, the popular version of small groups are unsatisfactory for the task of discipleship because they fail to challenge deeply the consumeristic bent of Christians in culture. This chapter will further explain and expand upon the idolatrous worldview that is a barrier to faithful discipleship in community. Rather than give an exhaustive look at the current culture of America, the focus will be primarily on three aspects of the culture that are pervasive in the American church: (1) Individualism, (2) Materialism, and (3) Consumerism. These ideas are certainly prevalent in America at large and also within churches that exist in this current culture.

Cultural Idolatry

In his book *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, David Wells summarizes the task of thinking about cultural idolatry this way:

> On the one hand, we have to think about the modern world in terms of the ideas that arose in the Enlightenment because they have come to dominate the way people think about life in the West. On the other hand, we need to think about the way in which our social fabric has been reshaped through the processes of modernization because this has created a psychological environment which we all inhabit. The additional challenge is, then, to show how these ideas and this reshaping have worked toward the same ends, the one reinforcing and giving plausibility to the other.[1]

The church always exists in culture and is seeking to follow and obey Jesus in a particular context in a particular time full of a particular people in a particular location with particular values and ways of interacting. The culture profoundly shapes the way faith is

[1]David Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), Kindle ed., loc. 448-452.

practiced. In his book *Consuming Religion*, Vincent Miller highlights the fact that "consumer culture is not merely a set of ideologies…it is primarily a way of relating to beliefs – a set of habits of interpretation of use – that renders the 'content' of beliefs and values less important."[2] The culture in which a person inhabits will certainly shape how they receive the Christian faith and put historical orthodoxy into practice.

Individualism

Individualism is the predominant viewpoint of how most people in the American church see themselves. Fundamentally, most individuals in American culture view themselves as an autonomous unit, making decisions as an isolated authority only secondarily responsible to other parties. Hellerman references the predominant definition of American Individualism here:

> Social scientists have a label for the pervasive cultural orientation of modern American society that makes it so difficult for us to stay connected and grow together in community with one another. They call it radical individualism. What this amounts to is simple enough. We in America have been socialized to believe that our own dreams, goals, and personal fulfillment ought to take precedence over the well-being of any group—our church or our family, for example—to which we belong. The immediate needs of the individual are more important than the long-term health of the group.[3]

This individualism is seen in how people interact with any number of different groups. Hellerman continues:

> Social anthropologists refer to modern America as a weak-group society where the needs, goals, and desires of the individual come first. Personal allegiance to the group—whether that group is my family, my church, my co-workers, or a civic organization of some sort—is a secondary consideration. We tend to view the groups in our lives in a rather utilitarian way. These broader social entities serve as resources that we as individuals draw on in order to realize our own goals and to navigate our personal pathways through life.[4]

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[2]Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 1.

[3]Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2009), 4.

[4]Ibid.

Hellerman illustrates this individualistic worldview in how Americans tend to answer the three most important questions of life:

> We can summarize our most important life-decisions under three headings: Vocation - What I am going to do with my life? Spouse - Who I am going to spend my life with? Residence - Where I am going to live? As an American individualist, my personal identity is deeply rooted in the decisions I make along these lines, and I alone am ultimately responsible for my choices—choices that determine my very destiny in so many crucial areas of life. Social scientists use terms like 'self-reliance' and 'autonomy' to describe this uniquely Western approach to decision making and identity formation.[5]

Church involvement and discipleship mirrors what is seen in American culture today. "I" is the primary consideration, not "you" or "we" when it comes to church involvement. As is often the case for most of the church today, the individual is the primary lens through which life is approached.

At The Austin Stone, along with many other churches, this individualism is evidenced in a few primary ways. First, finding "community" or a set of relationships that a person can naturally engage in is incredibly challenging because individuals are able to "custom-build" their lives. Their vocation has no tie to their neighborhood other than the distance of a commute, and their recreational activities are limitless, pursued in other parts of the city. Attempting to cultivate community, which depends on shared rhythms and spaces, becomes virtually impossible when everyone creates their own.

Secondly, this individualism shows up in their response to authority, whether in the form of the Word of God or the elders who shepherd the church. The study of the Word is predominantly filtered through the lens of "what I think is true" rather than what the author intended and the community of saints has understood to be orthodox interpretation. A submission to eldership for the care of the soul is almost unheard of, and certainly church discipline is an unfamiliar, if not written-off, practice. It is, however, something that is faithfully practiced at The Austin Stone.

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[5]Ibid., 22.

Lastly, the transitory nature of our congregation provides evidence of this worldview. Career opportunity for individual gain is the driving force behind a decision about where someone will live. Seldom would someone give any thought to the impact that their leaving would have on their church community, and rarely would an individual concern themselves with input from our community other than simply some guidance toward what would maximize their quality of life.

David Wells asserts the pervasiveness of this worldview in Western culture, rooting the foundation in the naturalistic philosophy of the Enlightenment. Speaking of the similarities of modernity and postmodernity, Wells points out,

> [At] the center of both is the autonomous self, despite all the postmodern chatter about the importance of community. During the Enlightenment, this was worked out in antireligious ways, the Enlightenment thinkers refusing to be fettered by any transcendent being or any authority outside of themselves. In postmodernity, the autonomous being refuses to be fettered by any objective reality outside of itself. In the end, the difference is simply that the revolt in the first case took a more religious turn and in the second a more general turn.[6]

Regardless of whether or not the church is ministering in a modern or postmodern context, the worldview of choice is autonomous individualism. The consequence of this radical individualism, Hellerman points out,

> subtly yet certainly sets us up for failure in our efforts to stay and grow in the context of the often difficult but redemptive relationships that God has provided for us. Radical individualism has affected our whole way of viewing the Christian faith, and it has profoundly compromised the solidarity of our relational commitments to one another.[7]

Community life is increasingly difficult because our culture is awash with individual autonomy.

Materialism

Individualism is not the only challenge to ministry in our culture. Materialism,

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[6]Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, loc. 1110–15.

[7]Hellerman, *When the Church,* 6.

the pervasive idolatry of allowing possessions to define identity, is rampant as well. Commenting on the interaction of values and culture, James Davison Hunter points out:

> In America today, 86 to 88 percent of the people adhere to some faith commitments. And yet our culture – business culture, law and government, the academic world, popular entertainment – is intensely materialistic and secular. Only occasionally do we hear references to religious transcendence in these realms, and even these are vague, generic, and void of particularity.[8]

Although many would profess to have an outlook that would critique a materialistic life, materialism is pervasive. Materialism predominantly addresses the ends towards which Americans' lives are aiming. Much of our pursuit of life is driven by having things – a home, financial security, possessions. The lives of most in the predominant American culture, churches included, are driven towards material provision or enjoyment.

In his book *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, Randy Alcorn speaks of materialism this way:

> The hardest part of dealing with our materialism is that it has become so much a part of us. Like people who have lived in darkness for years, we have been removed from the light so long we do not know how dark it really is. Many of us have never known what it is not to be materialistic. It is normal, the only way we know.[9]

Materialism is most evidenced by the sheer volume of income available to the American public at large and simultaneously how much is actually utilized primarily on the enjoyment of the earner rather than investment in society or generosity toward others. American culture is preoccupied with obtaining things for oneself, even though culture nominally values generosity in that "the vast majority of U.S. adults donated money in 2012 to charities or churches" according to Barna.[10] Despite people giving something in 2012, "more than half of donors (55 percent) say they donated an amount of $500 or

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[8]James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle ed., loc. 262–64.

[9]Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), 60.

[10]Barna Group, "American Donor Trends" (2013), https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/606-american-donor-trends#.UhUi2JI3uSp (accessed August 21, 2013).

less."[11] In the church, it is not much better: according to Barna research, "among born again Christians, which includes both evangelicals and non-evangelicals, 12 percent tithed in 2012, which is on par with the average for the past decade."[12] If how people spend their money is the best indication of what they value, those who attend evangelical churches do not value the church highly.

Anecdotally, the people of The Austin Stone validate the evidence Barna supports. In 2008, Warren Bird and Scott Thumma did a case study on The Austin Stone for a wider study on American megachurches. Through this study, Thumma and Bird found that 68 percent of The Austin Stone gives less than 5 percent of their income to the church. Although The Austin Stone is a fairly young church with many college students who are not yet producing income, 45 percent of our church makes over $50,000 per year.[13] Clearly there is a disconnect in generosity, at least as it is directed toward the church, relative to earning capacity.

Consumerism

Finally, consumerism is the third predominant component of an American worldview. Primarily, individuals seek to understand what benefit a person or thing can provide for them. Americans approach situations and circumstances attempting to answer the question "What can I get out of this?" rather than "How can I contribute to this?" Consumerism is an appetite that drives behaviors and a viewpoint that informs expectations in any given interaction with another person or entity.

The pervasiveness of consumerism is captured superbly by David Wells in

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Warren Bird and Scott Thumma, "Congregational Survey Analysis: The Austin Stone Community Church," Leadership Network and Hartford Institute for Religion Research (January 6, 2009), http://toddengstrom.com/?attachment_id=2504 (accessed February 24, 2014).

Above All Earthly Pow'rs, saying America "has become a paradise of unlimited, endless consumption, where desire now substitutes for the moral norms which were once there. And desire is never satiated."[14] Skye Jethani points out the pervasiveness of consumerism through commodification removing the intrinsic value of an object. Speaking incisively into American culture with respect to engagement in worship and spirituality, Jethani explains:

> 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. He is a tool we employ, a force we control, and a resource we plunder. We ascribe value to him (the literal meaning of the word "worship") based not on who he is, but on what he can do for us.[15]

Consumption is rampant in American culture and in the American church, and impacts nearly every facet of life today. The church is far from immune from the insidious power of consumerism.

Considering consumerism through the lens of juvenilization, Bergler highlights how consumerism and immaturity feed one another. Perpetuating immaturity contributes to greater consumption, and easy consumption assuages the pain of immaturity and insignificant identity. As he puts it, "Encouraging people to settle into some of the worst traits of adolescence is good for business."[16] This particular idea surfaces in the church that perpetuates immature disciples. Often without critical thought, a program is created within the local church to meet a theological, emotional, sociological, or physiological need, but ends up cultivating a dependent relationship for the disciple. Small groups often capitalize on a need for friendship or Bible study, but create a dependency for a social infrastructure and theological education. They hinder the disciple from creating and

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[14]Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, loc. 668–75.

[15]Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 27.

[16]Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), Kindle ed., loc. 116–20.

cultivating natural relationships in the context of mission and foster a dependence on curriculum for growing in the knowledge of God's Word.

Although "seeker-sensitive" churches have been incredibly effective in communicating the gospel message to those far from God, there were many unintended consequences of a missiological strategy rooted in consumerism. Alan Hirsch clearly critiques the strategy built off consumerism, saying,

> The church growth movement and the way we do evangelism catered to the very thing we need to work against - consumerism. Consumerism is an alternative religion…people are looking for purpose, meaning, significance, belonging, community. In other words the very thing that religion offers to us, or ought to, is being sought in consumption. The whole church growth movement the methodology was coopted to consumerism. We just created a whole lot of consumers. The only thing we can do is disciple people over against that . . . it was faulty as a methodology at the start. You can't make disciples out of consumers, you can't consume your way into the kingdom.[17]

The Austin Stone also is affected by the consumeristic bent of people in the church. Although serving in the church is routinely emphasized, connecting to community, and being on mission together, as of January 2012 only about 32 percent of those who attend The Austin Stone are involved in a missional community, only 26 percent of people volunteer in a Sunday ministry, and only 20 percent are involved formally in a ministry to the city.[18] Clearly there is a large disparity in involvement in the life and ministry of the church relative to Sunday attendance. Many people that are involved on Sunday are perfectly content to attend a worship service where they receive the benefit of preaching and worship, but struggle to contribute to the life of our church in actively engaging or serving in ministry.

The average American, awash in a consumer culture, approaches God and the

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[17]Alan Hirsch, "How Modern Evangelism Creates Consumers" (Austin, TX: Verge Conference, 2013), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2sNSVqIKzIA&list=PLBDFD0826D8E43DB0 (accessed August 21, 2013).

[18]The Austin Stone Community Church, "Internal Survey of The Austin Stone," http://toddengstrom.com/?attachment_id=2506 (accessed February 24, 2014).

church in order to obtain some benefit. Churches are ministering in a context ripe with choice and consumption. What should the response be? Without carefully considering the effects of catering to a consumeristic need, it is very easy to cultivate a culture and ministry that perpetuate immaturity.

Incomplete Models of Discipleship

By and large, most successful American churches have recognized these idolatries as problematic and are responding to them in a variety of ways. To combat individualism, the church creates a small groups ministry. To combat materialism, the church runs generosity campaigns and teaches principles of biblical stewardship. To combat consumerism, the church attempts to involve people in serving in the ministry and mission of the church. The church certainly has had responses to the predominant worldview of congregants.

Many churches, however, are still significantly deficient in the full participation of every congregant in making disciples. Many run small group systems, but rarely are small group participants replicating disciples. Many pastors preach on generosity in finances, but the American church still struggles to give generously. Nearly every church struggles to recruit volunteers and leaders, despite their greatest efforts at providing opportunities and programs to serve for the benefit of someone else. Could it be that there is a fundamental, systemic issue prevalent in American churches that leave them with little success despite our ability to gather Christians in droves? Wells argues that "what has not been taken sufficiently into account, of course, is how we are embedded in our culture, how this acts upon us, and what its shaping forces are."[19] He then applies this insight to a prevalent form of the church in America:

> Many in the new seeker-sensitive experiment in "doing church" have seen only the surface habits of this postmodern world and have not really understood its Eros

[19]Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs,* loc. 1080–82.

> spirituality. Theirs is an experiment in tactics in which innumerable questions have been asked about the ways the Church can become successful in this culture and they are all prefaced by the word how.[20]

The church has recognized the problems of our culture, but has not provided a sufficient amount of thought to how deeply the culture has shaped thinking and action in the church. Leaders have thus failed to respond to these challenges in a deeply thoughtful, integrated way that challenges the predominant worldview. This is readily apparent within the context of small groups.

On a theological and strategic level, however, the church has attempted to challenge the first two idolatries. Individualism is theologically countered with believers' identity as God's adopted children, and the call to engage practically in living like a family through a small group. Hellerman, though, points out that "simply knowing the commands and prohibitions of Scripture has proven to be an insufficient defense against the powerful socializing influence of radical individualism in the lives of American Christians."[21] The typical church response has been purely on a pragmatic level, attempting to address particular issues of pervasive sin with simple, programmatic responses. The church consistently has been addressing the problem of materialism through understanding that no man can serve two masters, and Christ surrendered the wealth of heaven so that Christians might be radically generous. Practically, the church has taught on stewardship and challenged men and women to radical generosity and support of many noble ministries.

Church leaders, however, rarely address the insidious idolatry of consumerism in a strategic way. Most forms actually foster or cater to this false worship of the heart. The refrain is often "come and be fed by the teaching we have to offer (worship services); have your relational needs met by a community we provide (small groups); have your

[20]Ibid., loc. 2532–35.

[21]Hellerman, *When the Church*, 84.

psychological and dependency issues worked through in our programs (recovery programs); participate in this low barrier event to engage the mission God has given us (service and evangelism events)." Miller points out both the insufficiency of a purely theological response and the necessity of responding hermeneutically:

> The most profound challenge of consumer culture is neither a heretical corruption of doctrine, nor the theology or ontology implicit in particular practices. Such problems are familiar ground for theology. It has a well-developed interpretive grid and analytical methods for addressing such crises. For this reason, it is always tempting to lure cultural problems such as consumerism into this familiar territory where implicit doctrines, values, and anthropologies can be evaluated, found wanting and declared anathema. The problem faced in consumer culture is of an entirely different order and thus calls for a fundamentally different response. This is a crisis for hermeneutical methods in theology since it has to do with the function rather than the content of the meanings.[22]

Miller's basic argument is that simply to know what is true biblically is insufficient to counteract the effect of consumerism. The church must also have interpretive and practical ways in which a different narrative is told and the faith that has been handed down for two millennia is lived out in the current culture. Later, he states,

> If the fundamental problem is how consumer culture transforms the way we practice beliefs, then any adequate response must attend to the level of practice…In the pluralistic world of consumer culture, religious communities seldom exercise strategic control of the field of action. Rather, they are limited to tactical actions that must locate themselves in a world dominated by foreign logics.[23]

Miller's work is aimed perhaps more at the counteraction of consumer culture in general, whereas this work will primarily be aimed at the explicitly religious level of practice inside a community of faith. Regardless, his point is well taken – the church must indeed think theologically but also strategically and practically in order to disciple effectively in the current culture of consumerism. The message of the gospel and the proclamation of the Word of God certainly have power, but so too do the forms in which people gather as a church. James Davison Hunter points out that the forms have

[22]Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 4–5.

[23]Ibid., 10.

tremendous power to shape people,

> for human desire is rooted in a normative framework; that is, the structures of human desire are framed and shaped by historical and sociological forces that are, as sociologists will often say, "relatively autonomous" from the market. What this means, in other words, is that the "things" created are not culturally neutral, and neither is desire, but both are infused with a moral significance that operates somewhat independently from though always through the market itself.[24]

The activities of culture that reinforce consumerism have a powerful shaping effect on people.

Consumerism is not only rampant in our culture; it reigns unchallenged in many church communities. Wells points out the impact of catering to seekers:

> Seeker churches are brilliantly exploiting this spiritual search. It is producing a seeker's culture. America is tuned in to spiritual matters but not to religious formulations. This makes it very easy to gain a hearing for what is spiritual but hard to maintain a genuinely biblical posture because that becomes a part of "religion." It is very easy to build churches in which seekers congregate; it is very hard to build churches in which biblical faith is maturing into genuine discipleship.[25]

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer so poignantly put it, "The basis of spiritual community is truth; the basis of emotional community is desire."[26] Theologically, believers must understand that Christ paid the ultimate price for sin, so that they never have to, but that does not simply mean they go on about their normal lives. Nothing less than a life completely and utterly surrendered to Christ himself will suffice in light of such a great act of mercy and sacrifice. To place Jesus on the throne of one's heart is to remove oneself from the center of it. One's life is to be oriented to what God desires instead of one's own desires. Narcissistic consumerism dies at Calvary, and yet so much of it persists in the forms and language of church both implicitly and explicitly.

Church Planting Movements

As the American church has been experiencing decline, the church is

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[24]Hunter, *To Change the World*, loc. 430–32.

[25]Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*, loc. 1893–99.

[26]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 31.

exploding in many places around the world. Many of these movements have been the source of study and critique, but it is hard to deny that the Spirit of God is at work around the world, and the American church would be wise to learn a thing or two from these expressions of the church. A survey of these movements can provide a very insightful view into forms that may help in counteracting the rampant consumerism of the church. David Garrison has done a wonderful job observing many of these movements, summarizing several of the common traits in his book *Church Planting Movements*, and Alan Hirsch has delved into crucial elements of movements in *The Forgotten Ways* and several successive works.[27] Three fundamental traits are quite instructive for the American church: (1) The Lordship of Jesus; (2) Obedience-based discipleship; (3) The expectation of multiplication. Each of these topics will be explored in contrast to the idolatries of American culture.

The Lordship of Jesus

The first staple of movements is not pragmatics. The blazing center of movements is Jesus himself. Where the gospel is rapidly expanding, the exaltation of Jesus is always at the center. However, the unique theme that Hirsch draws out so well in *The Forgotten Ways* is the centrality, not simply of the person and work of Jesus, but specifically, of his lordship. That Jesus is the sovereign ruler of our lives as Christians, that whatever he says goes, certainly runs contrary to the predominant consumeristic and individualistic bent in most Western churches. Consumeristic Christians believe Jesus exists for their needs, not they for his. Individualisitc Christians believe they are the final authority, not the Lord Jesus and his revealed Word. If beleivers are to see the church – its mission and her community – revive, a fundamental commitment to the worship of

[27]David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Monument, CO: WIGTake, 2004); Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006).

Christ as Lord will be at the center. Jesus, as he has revealed himself through His authoritative Word will be the fuel for a generation on fire.

Obedience-based Discipleship

Garrison and Cole observe an important truth about movements that is a result of Christ's Lordship, namely, that his disciples must obey. In many movements around the globe, a key distinction is that discipleship is not simply the process of knowing about God through his Word but about actually obeying his commandments on a daily basis. Where the gospel is rapidly advancing, training happens little by little, topic by topic over a period of time, and obedience is the ultimate objective.

Such thinking stands in stark contrast to the predominant western view of equipping in the church. Many of our training systems focus on the accumulation of comprehensive knowledge before one is sent into mission. Obedience is assumed to be the outcome of a fully trained person, but one needs only look at the failure rate of church plants to know this is not the case. Additionally, the predominant vehicle for equipping in the American church, the pulpit, has very little accountability to obedience, serving primarily for teaching or inspiration to relatively anonymous groups of people.

Generation X (GenX) has not helped the church much in this regard, shunning virtually any authority structure and relegating measurement or accountability out the door of the church with overconfidence in their abilities. Simply because flesh and culture rebel against the expectation of obedience, however, does not mean that the church should do away with accountability in favor of positive messaging and vision casting. Toward this end, church membership and accountability go hand in glove with obedience-based discipleship. What if the church began to think through not just how to communicate the truth of God, but how to disciple people in the context of everyday life to obey God's revealed Word and expect obedience?

Expecting Multiplication

Finally, movements around the globe actually expect Christ-followers to make and multiply disciples. If the Great Commission is for all God's people, then very practically the church should be looking to everyday people to be making and maturing disciples of Jesus. Multiplication is expected when everyone is playing a part. Alan Hirsch aptly observes, "Every believer a church planter, every church a church planting church."[28] The sentiment is that everyone "plays in the game," and as a church they are expecting growth and multiplication to result.

As it relates to forms of church, the focus on methods has been in cultivating simple rhythms that are easily reproducible and are transferrable across cultural barriers. For simple rhythms, churches depend less on an expensive week to week gathering, and more on a life on life discipleship model in which teaching is conducted little-by-little, topic-by-topic, over time. For reproducibility, the dependence on outside resources like church buildings, books, conferences, and other tools are downplayed, favoring instead story-formed teaching that does not require expertise, meeting in homes, and training that is conducted indigenously. When it comes to transferrable practices and forms, the basic life of a disciple must be something that can be practiced in any context, whether a middle-Eastern convert in an impoverished, isolated village or an affluent London businessman.

Movements of the gospel expect multiplication to occur, and remove unnecessary barriers to the expansion of the gospel. Finally, most often these movements are built on the backbone of smaller communities rather than larger church gatherings. The context of discipleship is primarily in a small community centered on the lordship of Christ, obeying his Word, and making more disciples of him. Contextualization presents an entirely different question that is not focus of this work, but the point of exploring

[28]Alan Hirsch, "Every Believer a Church Planter," http://vimeo.com/14626641 (accessed August 21, 2013).

movements is to seek to cultivate forms that promote, rather than hinder, multiplication.

An Integrated Approach to Discipleship

To this point, American culture and the current circumstances of many American churches have been critiqued, and also contrasted with some positive things happening globally. The real question to wrestle with is "How do we get from where we are to what could be?" Phrased more precisely, the major question the church must grapple with right now is "How do we go from being consumers to becoming missionaries?" Bergler suggests,

> [churches need] practices and environments that will help them grow into spiritual maturity. They need to ask hard questions about the music they sing, the curriculum materials they use, and the ways they structure the activities of the church. Is what we are doing together reinforcing mature or immature versions of the faith? In our attempts to "reach" people in our community, are we conceding too much to the characteristic weaknesses and besetting sins of our culture?[29]

The heart of this project and the journey of The Austin Stone has been an attempt to answer that question. Quite simply, how does a church disciple those in their care through the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit away from consumerism to the sacrificial missionary life?

In order to accomplish that task effectively, the first place to search is God's revealed Word to understand a theology of community. Second, that theology must be applied into the current circumstances and develop a philosophy of ministry that thoughtfully challenges cultural presuppositions. Finally, a set of simple, reproducible and transferrable practices must be developed that reinforce theology and philosophy into the everyday lives of everyday people in everyday communities.

Francis Schaeffer, assessing the church toward the end of the twentieth century, asserts,

The call of God [is] to simultaneously practice the orthodoxy of doctrine and the

[29]Bergler, *The Juvenilization*, loc. 3149–53.

> orthodoxy of community in the visible church. The latter of these we have too often all but forgotten. But one cannot explain the explosive dynamite, the *dunamis*, of the early church apart from the fact they practiced two things simultaneously: orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community in the midst of the visible church, a community which the world could see. By the grace of God, therefore, the church must be known simultaneously for its purity of doctrine and the reality of its community. Our churches have so often only been preaching points with very little emphasis on community, but the exhibition of the love of God in practice is beautiful and must be there.[30]

Predominantly, the problems seen in the American church need to be addressed on theological, philosophical, and practical grounds in an integrated way. Theologically, it is important to understand how the doctrine of salvation speaks directly to people's identity in Christ in contrast to their identity as individualists, materialists, and consumers. Philosophically, an integrated approach needs to be constructed which simultaneously and systemically counteracts those unhelpful worldviews. Practically, the American church needs some different ways of acting out our faith together to faithfully make disciples of the lost.

James Davison Hunter summarizes it this way:

> Healthy formation is impossible without a healthy culture embedded within the warp and woof of community. This has always been the case, but it is especially important in a context where the plausibility structures that make belief credible and consistent are so weakened. Community is no longer "natural" under the conditions of late modernity, and so it will require an intentionality that is unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable to most Christians and most churches.[31]

Very practically and succinctly, the church needs to move from consumerism to becoming self-feeding disciple-makers, move from individualism to living as the family of God, move from materialism to becoming radically generous grace-givers. All of this must be addressed through the vehicle of a relational community centered on the person and work of Christ. This idealized form of community has been the active pursuit of most church leaders, but more often than not has not been realized in the American church.

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[30]Francis Schaeffer, *The Church before the Watching World: A Practical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971), 62.

[31]Hunter, *To Change the World*, loc. 31–05.

Bonhoeffer accurately observes, “Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it.”[32] What coalesces from those convictions about the identity of the church is a systemic response to cultivating disciples and leaders for movements. The basic vehicle is what The Austin Stone calls “missional community.”

[32]Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 30.

CHAPTER 4

A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEMIC DISCIPLESHIP IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Introduction

As I argued in the previous section, in order to make disciples faithfully the church needs both a sound understanding of contemporary culture, as well as a robust theological grounding from God's Word. Primarily, the ministry and function of the church have been rooted in ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Traditional systematic theologies discuss two aspects of the church (universal and local): the purpose of the church (worship God, serve the church, evangelize the lost) and the marks of a healthy church (qualified leadership, discipline, sacraments). From these doctrines, the practice of a local church is constructed in culture.

The church, however, is rightly understood in light of the saving work of Christ in the lives of individual believers, rather than independent from it. John Webster grounds the necessary character of the church in the gospel, explaining that "the existence of a new social order is a necessary implicate of the gospel of Jesus Christ"; hence, "the life of the Christian community is internal to the logic of the gospel [and not] simply accessory and accidental."[1] He goes on further to ground the church in the doctrines of God and salvation. Specifically, he contends that the church "is ingredient within the divine economy of salvation."[2] The doctrine of salvation is intricately interwoven in the

[1]John Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," *Ecclesiology* 1 (2004): 9.

[2]John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 193, 195, quoted in Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), Kindle ed., loc. 1096–1100.

doctrine of the church.

Soteriology does not simply drive ecclesiology, though. It also answers the underlying questions of culture. With respect to postmodern culture, David Wells points out that the longing found in the postmodern ethos "is not simply a postmodern experience; its deepest connection is not sociological but, in fact, soteriological."[3] To have a soteriologically rooted ecclesiology is, indeed, the response to the deepest longings of people and cultures. The doctrines of salvation are a salve to an American steeped in consumerism, materialism and individualism.

In order to construct an integrative response to American culture as a church, the first task is to work theologically from a soteriological level. Theologically, the doctrines of salvation provide an excellent survey of the believer's identity in Christ and stand starkly in contrast to the worldview predominant in the American church. Specifically, each doctrine provides a position to challenge those perspectives rampant in culture and call the church to repentance. Rather than develop a fully exhaustive ecclesiology, I will focus on four traditional doctrines of soteriology (election, regeneration, adoption, sanctification) and summarize them into three core identities (disciple, family, missionary) of the believer. These identities will form the foundation for the practices of missional community.

A missional community is a small part of the local church, and therefore ought to be a sub-discipline of ecclesiology. While the church is indeed a community on mission, a missional community as this project defines it does not contain every mark of a local church found in Scripture. Particularly, the missional community model I advocate does not involve the regular preaching of the Word of God, nor necessarily include the regular singing of worship within a gathering. While some in the missional

[3]David Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), Kindle ed., loc. 3077–79.

community discussion would advocate that a missional community is in totality a church, a biblical church must obey include all that the Bible teaches about church practice, including corporate gathering for teaching and worship. Missional communities, however, must still be grounded in the same soteriological framework in order to remain consistent with and augment the work of the corporate church gatherings.

For a missional community to be a theologically grounded model for discipleship, missional communities must be rooted in a soteriological framework. As Gregg Allison argues, "from the ontology or nature of the church flow the church's functions."[4] The doctrines of the church are not isolated from God's salvific work in the lives of people whom he has called, has justified, has and is sanctifying, and will glorify. The church is understood rightly as chosen, called, justified, redeemed, adopted, sanctified, and, ultimately, glorified through our union with Christ, and that produces the practices of the church. Missional communities that multiply disciples in the context of a healthy church that will produce movement must also therefore be rooted in this framework. Gregg Allison's approach is noteworthy: "Accordingly, I take an ontological approach to the construction of my ecclesiology, focusing first on identity markers of the church, while properly noting the teleological orientation of many of the church's characteristics and while also deriving its function— its ministries and mission— from those attributes."[5]

Traditional Doctrines of Soteriology

The church is not defined simply by an isolated set of prescriptions that God outlined in Scripture. The church proceeds from God's redeeming work for humanity in Christ, and the church fits right into the middle of God's purpose in the world to glorify

[4]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, loc. 665-667.

[5]Ibid., loc. 1078–81.

himself. In popular culture, the church is often perceived as events that are held (services, programs, etc.), but very rarely do individual Christians, or many church leaders for that matter, ask the question "Why?" Why do believers gather for worship? Why do they practice communion and baptism? Why do they live life together in missional communities?

Ultimately, it is because what people do is rooted in who they are. Who Christians are proceeds from what God has done in Christ. The church is founded upon what God has done. What bearing does this identity have on the church as a corporate body? When the church gathers together, what does this mean about who they are? What are they not anymore? Seldom does church leadership thoughtfully answer these questions or design ministry strategy in light of these realities. Fundamentally, the identity of a church is wrapped up in the work of God in salvation. Christians cannot understand the identity of the church apart from God's saving work in his people. Once the identity of the church is properly conceived, the structure and activity of the church necessarily follows. The activities of any church must flow from its identity in Christ.

Why does the church gather corporately for worship? Because Christians are a people called out by God and given new desires and new affections, and God wants them to express that corporate identity as a worshipping people. These activities flow out of who God created the church to be! Why does God command the church to make disciples? Because the church is the ordained means by which His calling would go forward into the world. Why did God give the church elders? Because He wanted the church to reflect the family He created through adoption, and He desired for a means through which He would help His children persevere to the end.

In the following sections, I will summarize four soteriological doctrines, but in a non-traditional order. According to Wayne Grudem, the *ordo salutis* proceeds as follows: Election, The Gospel Call, Regeneration, Conversion, Justification, Adoption,

Sanctification, Perseverance, Death and Glorification.[6] While this order is incredibly helpful in teaching the chronology of the process of salvation, from the perspective of applying doctrine into the life of the church, other orders can be helpful. Particularly, I will focus on Regeneration and Sanctification first to create a framework for the identity of an individual disciple, then focus on Adoption for the identity of a community as family, and finally on Election as a foundation for missionary identity. The flow of this presentation of soteriology is driving towards the believer's identity in relation to God, his or her identity in relation to other believers, and finally his or her identity in relation to unbelievers.

Regeneration

The first aspect of salvation that has tremendous implications for our identity and activity as the church is the doctrine of regeneration. Ezekiel's prophecy in the Old Testament is perhaps the clearest articulation of this doctrine biblically:

> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezek 36:26-28)

God sovereignly moves by the power of his Spirit to give his people a new affection for his glory when he saves us. Commenting on this, Millard Erickson reminds us that "the new birth is the restoration of human nature to what it originally was intended to be and what it in fact was before sin entered the human race at the time of the fall. It is simultaneously the beginning of a new life and a return of the original life and activity."[7] Wayne Grudem defines regeneration as "a secret act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to us. This is sometimes called 'being born again' (using language from John

[6]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 670.

[7]Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 957.

3:3–8).”[8] In their sin, people do not lose the capacity for worship; they lose the capacity for the worship of God. In the act of regeneration, God captivates the believer’s heart, turning him or her from idolatrous worshippers of creation to passionate worshippers of Himself.

Romans 1 speaks to the idolatrous nature of the sinful heart to worship creation:

> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom 1:21-25)

Every person under the sun is a worshipper. What separates the redeemed from the damned is the object of worship. Augustus Hopkins Strong articulates the idea this way:

> Regeneration does not add to, or subtract from, the number of man’s intellectual, emotional or voluntary faculties. But regeneration is the giving of a new direction or tendency to powers of affection which man possessed before. Man had the faculty of love before, but his love was supremely set on self. In regeneration the direction of that faculty is changed, and his love is now set supremely upon God.[9]

The church, then, is a group of people with new hearts, new desires and new lives oriented around the exaltation of God. Regenerate Christians live lives of worship and gratitude. A Christian is not dead towards God, but increasingly desires him and his renown over the course of life. Additionally, the church is a repentant people who know the false worship of sin cannot satisfy longings or bring glory to God.

The implications of regeneration spill into a person’s actions. According to Wayne Grudem “a genuine, Christlike love will be one specific result in life: ‘Everyone

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[8]Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 699.

[9]Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1909), 3:823.

who loves has been born of God and knows God' (1 John 4:7 NIV). Another effect of the new birth is overcoming the world: 'And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God has overcome the world' (1 John 5:3–4 NIV).[10]" Once the heart of the believer has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, the product will be a love for God expressed in thinking rightly about God, feeling affection for God, and obeying God's commandments in actions. Additionally, the regenerated believer is to cease pursuing sin and to pursue righteousness in obedience to the commandments of God.

Phrased differently, Jonathan Edwards explains the link between the heart's motivation and one's actions this way:

> The Author of our nature has not only given us affections, but has made them very much the spring of actions. As the affections not only necessarily belong to the human nature, but are a very great part of it; so (inasmuch as by regeneration persons are renewed in the whole man) holy affections not only necessarily belong to true religion, but are a very great part of such religion.[11]

Edwards is driving to the point that the affections of the heart drive the actions of man. To say it another way, what a person desires makes them act.

The regenerate heart and the activity of the regenerate man are certainly linked to one another, and Grudem points out,

> John emphasizes these as necessary results in the lives of those who are born again. If there is genuine regeneration in a person's life, he or she will believe that Jesus is the Christ, and will refrain from a life pattern of continual sin, and will love his brother, and will overcome the temptations of the world, and will be kept safe from ultimate harm by the evil one. These passages show that it is impossible for a person to be regenerated and not become truly converted.[12]

If the church is a converted, worshipping community, then individual, communal and corporate practices of worship will necessarily follow.

Worship, although not solely a function of the heart's affections, will

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[10]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 705.

[11]Jonathan Edwards, "A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 1:238.

[12]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 705.

predominantly be characterized by the regenerate heart adopting a posture of repentance and faith. Wayne Grudem maintains that

> it is important to realize that faith and repentance are not confined to the beginning of the Christian life. They are rather attitudes of heart that continue throughout our lives as Christians . . . . Each day there should be heartfelt repentance for sins that we have committed, and faith in Christ to provide for our needs and to empower us to live the Christian life.[13]

A life of worship is marked not only by celebration in song, but also in an ongoing posture of repentance and faith. Therefore, God's people individually, communally and corporately will practice repentance and faith as an act of submission and worship to God.

The affections of a heart for God and the actions of repentance and faith are necessary implications of the doctrine of regeneration, and therefore ought to be explicitly included in the discipleship practices of the church. The implications of this truth will be addressed in chapter 5 of this project.

Sanctification

The doctrine of regeneration not only has implications for immediate salvation, but also in the church's continued worship, marked by repentance and faith. The church is a changing people, being more conformed to the image of Christ and reflecting His ministry in the world. He is the church's head, and the church is His body. Fundamental to the identity of the church is a desire for worship and a desire for conformity to the image of Christ in its actions. This is the territory of the doctrine of sanctification. Wayne Grudem transitions from regeneration to sanctification this way:

> This initial break with sin, then, involves a reorientation of our desires so that we no longer have a dominant love for sin in our lives. Paul knows that his readers were formerly slaves to sin (as all unbelievers are), but he says that they are enslaved no longer. "You who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness" (Rom. 6:17–18). This change of

[13]Ibid., 717.

one's primary love and primary desires occurs at the beginning of sanctification.[14] Sanctification is the both the declarative work of God that the believer is righteous in Christ, and ongoing outworking of the work of God to progressively conform a believer to Christ. Although positional sanctification has tremendous implications for the life of the believer, for the purposes of this project's attention will be primarily placed on progressive sanctification. Wayne Grudem defines sanctification as "a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives."[15] Progressive sanctification is pursuing conformity to Christ and what God has already declared us to be in Christ.

The church seeks conformity to Christ in both the heart's affections through internal disciplines and external obedience through proclamation of the gospel and demonstration of God's kingdom reality. Sanctification certainly happens on the individual level, but the church communally and corporately is also conformed to the image of Christ. As 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." The activity of the church communally must reflect the identity of the individual as a repenting and believing person.

Additionally, sanctification encompasses all the faculties of man. In Romans 12:2 we read, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." An active part of the church's sanctification is the renewing of its mind to think right thoughts about God, other people, and the world. Colossians 3:9-10 makes the act of thinking rightly about God an issue for becoming conformed to

[14]Ibid., 747–48.

[15]Ibid., 746.

Christ: "seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." Thinking and learning are clearly integral components to being sanctified.

Not only is the church being sanctified to think rightly, it is also chastened in its feeling as Paul teaches in Romans 6:17-18 that it should be "obedient from the heart." Obedience is not merely about thinking and action, but also about the affections and desires. Lastly, James 1:22 says that obedience is an action: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Thinking, feeling, and acting all must be conformed to the image of Christ by the power of the Spirit in submission to the word of God. Louis Berkhof says that

> [sanctification] affects the whole man: body and soul; intellect, affections and will. This follows from the nature of the case, because sanctification takes place in the inner life of man, in the heart, and this cannot be changed without changing the whole organism of man. If the inner man is changed, there is bound to be change also in the periphery of life.[16]

These faculties are not independent from one another, however. Charles Hodge rightly claims:

> The Scriptures do not contemplate the intellect, the will, and the affections, as independent, separable elements of a composite whole. These faculties are only different forms of activity in one and the same subsistence. No exercise of the affections can occur without an exercise of the intellect, and, if the object be moral or religious, without including a correspondent exercise of our moral nature.[17]

Conformity to Christ involves all the faculties of humanity being conformed to the image of Christ over time. Believers learn to think right thoughts with their minds, learn to feel right feelings with their hearts, and learn to produce right actions from their wills. Chapter 5 will explore the implications of this framework for sanctification on discipleship in the local church.

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[16]Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 533.

[17]Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 3:16.

To be sanctified in an ongoing way is to relearn the proper purpose and activity of one's God-given faculties to be changed into the image of Christ, who perfectly obeyed God with all of His heart, soul, mind and strength. The church communally and corporately, therefore, has the identity of learners, submitted to God's Word, who are growing in knowledge, affection and obedience by the power of the Holy Spirit to look more fully like Jesus Christ.

Adoption

The doctrine of adoption also plays a role in defining the identity of God's people. Stanley Grenz points out:

> Classical theology rightly affirms that God's program in the world is directed to individuals in the midst of human sin and need. Unfortunately this emphasis – correct as it is – all too often settles for a truncated soteriology resulting in an inadequate ecclesiology. The program of God includes the salvation of the individual, of course, but it overflows the human person in solitary aloneness. Our salvation occurs in relationships, not in isolation.[18]

The practice of community will be radically impacted if a church maintains a thoroughly individualistic soteriology. The soteriological doctrine of adoption is the antidote for such a reduced ecclesiology.

Wayne Grudem says, "We might initially think that we would become God's children by regeneration, since the imagery of being 'born again' in regeneration makes us think of children being born into a human family. But the New Testament never connects adoption with regeneration: indeed, the idea of adoption is opposite to the idea of being born into a family!"[19] Continuing, he says, "In regeneration God gives us new spiritual life within. In justification God gives us right legal standing before him. But in adoption God makes us members of his family. Therefore, the biblical teaching on adoption focuses much more on the personal relationships that salvation gives us with

[18]Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 481.

[19]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 738.

God and with his people."[20] The doctrine of adoption provides for the church a framework to consider their communal and corporate identity in light of their individual salvation.

Rather than focus attention on the implications of the doctrine of adoption relative to God, which is critical, we will attend to the doctrine's implications for human relationships inside the church. Grudem begins the conversation saying:

> In addition to these great privileges that concern our relationship to God and fellowship with him, we also have privileges of adoption that affect the way that we relate to each other and affect our own personal conduct. Because we are God's children, our relationship with each other is far deeper and more intimate than the relationship that angels, for example, have to one another, for we are all members of one family. Many times the New Testament refers to Christians as 'brothers' and 'sisters' in Christ (Rom. 1:13; 8:12; 1 Cor. 1:10; 6:8; James 1:2; Matt. 12:50; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 7:15; Philem. 1:2; James 2:15).[21]

The doctrine of adoption does indeed address the church's legal standing, but also propels believers to consider the nature of their relationships with one another as brothers and sisters. As adopted children in God's family, Christians have the same Father, are brothers and sisters, and are no longer orphans with no family at all. Stanley Grenz highlights these realities this way: "Because of Christ's work on our behalf and the Spirit's activity within us, we are coadoptees into the family of God, coparticipants in the relationship enjoyed between the Father and the Son, which is the Holy Spirit. In mediating this relationship to us the Spirit draws us together as one family."[22] Family, as defined by God's Holy Word, is not only a good metaphor for the church, but a spiritual identity as the result of salvation.

The implications of the doctrine of adoption are far reaching for the church. Particularly, if the church is theologically and practically the family of God, it must

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[20]Ibid., 736.

[21]Ibid., 741.

[22]Grenz, *Theology,* 484.

pursue relationships and practices reflective of that truth. The doctrine of adoption will be explored in the context of communal discipleship more fully in the fifth chapter of this project.

Election

Finally, we turn our attention to the doctrine of election. Wayne Grudem defines election this way: "Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure."[23] The doctrine of election is most often formulated in a manner consistent with Grudem's, and this is quite true and necessary. However, this definition is missing a critical component of divine election, especially as it applies to the purpose and function of the church. Divine election is not solely about election to salvation, but also election to a purpose. Stanely Grenz comments, "The proper orientation point for theology, however, is not the unfathomable eternal past. Instead we must look to the revealed intention of God for his creation in which his work in history will culminate."[24]

What is God's intention? The primary purpose of election is the glory of God. The means of God glorifying himself in the world in the New Covenant is through making disciples that participate in God's New Covenant community, the church. The purpose of God's electing love ultimately terminates on Himself and his glory, but the means by which He accomplishes that objective in time is His church. The church is made up of individuals chosen from a life of sin for a life of God's glory, but it also is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous

[23]Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 670.

[24]Grenz, *Theology*, 482–83.

light" (1 Peter 2:9). Proclamation of the good news of God's saving work is the corporate purpose for the church of God's electing love. Grenz concludes, "the biblical concept of election includes being chosen as a people in history for participation in the ongoing sweep of God's activity in the world."[25]

The fact that the second coming has not yet occurred is evidence that God desires more worshippers of himself, and therefore the church has an ongoing task to labor toward that end by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our identity as worshippers consistently demands more and greater worship for God. The church, therefore, also has a missionary identity to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and demonstrate the kingdom of God. This is the purpose for which the church has been chosen by God.

Gregg Allison expands on this idea thoroughly, relating the purpose of the church to God's election of a people in several different ways. He shows God's goodness to those in Christ through the lens of election, and then expands on 1 Peter 1:19-20:

> If the family image is specifically used here ('the firstborn among many brothers'), certainly the shadow of the redeemed community is not missing. If this is the case, then the church is part and parcel of the eternal purpose of the God who is good toward his redeemed human creatures.[26]

Simply put, the church was elected to missionary work. The election of the church as a family is to show God's goodness in redemption to the lost. While election certainly is theologically oriented around salvation, the church must also orient election towards the purpose of God to redeem.

Identities

This reflection on the work of God in Christ for the believer sparks awe and worship. The gospel has profound implications for the individual, communal, and corporate identity of a church. What God has done now dictates the identity of who His

[25]Ibid., 483.

[26]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, loc. 113–43.

people are. As Christ has done a great work for Christians in salvation, he also has now given them a new identity through union with Christ. A Christian is no longer a slave to sin; we are now children of the Most-High God. At The Austin Stone, we have summarized this new identity into three key aspects: disciples, family, and missionaries.

Disciple

Predominantly, the term disciple encapsulates all that it means to follow Jesus. For the purposes of cultivating a set of identities that counteract the pervasive American worldview, the focus of defining disciple will rest in two aspects: regeneration and sanctification. A disciple of Jesus is one who is captivated by worship of the most-high God, and who is pursuing conformity to the image of Christ through understanding the Word of God illuminated by the Spirit of God that produces a submitted, sanctified life. Simply put, and disciple is a worshipper and a learner.

As was mentioned above in the theological reflection on regeneration, everyone worships something. We worship because we were made that way. We worship what we treasure – the things that we value the most. We only worship things that are greater than ourselves, or that we at least perceive to be greater than ourselves. Romans 1:18-25 captures the sinful act of worship this way: "We exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped creation rather than the creator." All of us are worshippers, we are just worshipping the wrong thing. We are dead in sin and rebellion, worshipping what we ought not to worship.

God, however, through regeneration, establishes us as worshippers with a desire for him. First Peter 2:5 reminds us, "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." The purpose of our activity in the life of the church is to produce worship. Because of salvation, we are destined to worship Jesus. We love Jesus. Everything we do from start to finish is about the worship of Christ. As

believers, we worship Christ because He is the only one truly worthy of such a high level of devotion and affection, because "in Him, the fullness of God dwells in bodily form" (Col 2:9). Our identity has been fundamentally changed from idolater or false-worshipper to true worshipper of God in Christ. God's act of regeneration makes us worshippers.

As disciples, however, we are not fully formed worshippers. We also must learn and grow in our worship. People were not created with all knowledge, and Christians do not receive all knowledge in the act of regeneration. We were created to grow in our knowledge of God for all eternity. Part of our identity as created beings was to grow in the knowledge and affection of God. Ephesians 3:16-19 highlights this idea,

> That according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Because we are being sanctified by God, we are growing in knowledge, affections, and obedience to Jesus. We are becoming more like him. We fight sin because God is sanctifying us, and we study the Bible because God has created us to know him more fully. As Christians, we have a new identity as a learner, and combined with the identity of worshipper, we are disciples of Jesus. If the identity of a Christian is a disciple, then the practices of discipleship must necessarily reinforce that reality.

Family

The second core identity of the Christian that informs a biblical worldview is that of family. God created us in his image – a communal image, that of perfect relationship – yet we rebelled and destroyed it all. Because of our sins, we became orphans and slaves. However, according to the riches of God's mercy, he not only has justified us and given us righteousness, but has also completely adopted us into his family. Ephesians 1:5 states, "In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through

Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." We get the full rights of sons! The work of God to adopt us into His family gives us a new identity as sons and daughters and, collectively, we are a family.

Because we are adopted into God's family, we live in community with one another and function as brothers and sisters. We are more permanently bound to the people in our local churches through adoption than we are to our spouses! We will be brothers and sisters forever, but you are only husband and wife for a time (see Matt 22:30). Practically, what does this mean for us as a community? We now can live in a fundamentally different, gracious, and generous way like we see in Acts 2:42-47:

> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Because God has given us this identity as a family, we do not govern the church under the guise of sheer business pragmatism. The elders of a church lead as fathers, the members of a church conduct business as family, and the gathering of the church reflects affectionate relationships.

Drawing from his understanding of the sociological framework of family in the New Testament, Joseph Hellerman, citing Malina, prophetically speaks to the modern American church:

> For the early Christians the church was a family, and since family was the primary group for people in Mediterranean antiquity, the church represented the primary focus of group loyalty and solidarity for a Christian in the first century…What this means is, first of all, that the person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a church and responsible to the church for his or her actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. . . . The individual person is embedded in the church and is free to do what he or she feels right and necessary only if in accord with church norms and only if the action is in the church's best interest. The church

has priority over the individual member.[27]

How many of us would sign a covenant of church membership that looked like that?

Few churches reflect this kind of radical reorientation of life around relationships and mutual submission to operate as a family in America today. Rather than solely rebuking the current state of the church, Hellerman provides clarity as to what the church ought to pursue:

> For the early Christians, the church was not an institutional organization with a mortgage payment. The church was a living organism with a mission. The early church did not even own buildings. They met in homes. Like family. So we will have to begin to think of church in much more organic and relational terms than we are used to doing.[28]

Because the church is both theologically and practically a family, she must strive to live in light of her identity. Hellerman's exposition of the New Testament family model provides sounds principles and practices that both critique the American conception and challenge the church to greater depth, commitment, and mutual submission in relationships. A church who understands the identity of family will be committed to living like one, and chapter six will explore practices to cultivate this identity of family.

Missionary

The church is not merely disciples and family, but has an identity and purpose in the world. God wants to display to the world the glorious riches of His grace through the church. In His electing love, God has chosen to send us into the world (John 20:21) to be "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." The corporate identity of the church and the individual identity of a disciple is that of a missionary.

Before the church does mission, she is a community of missionaries. The church collectively does not have a mission department, for it is a missionary community.

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[27]Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2009), citing B. Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 19.

[28]Hellerman, *When the Church*, 51–52.

The nature of mission is not solely individualistic though. Speaking about the mission of the church, Gregg Allison points out:

> Being missional is a matter of corporate identity first, then individual engagement. Missions is not conceived to be first of all the 'mission of the church,' to which every member is joined. First it is the mission of the Christian, which in the church becomes a collective responsibility. This entrenched trend must be reversed, and an emphasis on the missional identity of the church helps in this regard.[29]

Unfortunately missions is often relegated to the periphery of the church or delegated to a particular subset because of a faulty understanding of Christian identity. Because God's electing love has individual, communal, and corporate dimensions, the church must conceive of her missionary identity in all three areas. No one portion of the church is exempt from missionary activity because no portion of the church is constituted apart from a missionary identity.

Often community is popularly conceived of as an internally focused activity in the church, meeting the needs primarily of Christians for family. Christian unity and community has a purpose, however:

> Jesus prays that the church's unity will have both vertical and horizontal dimensions: vertically, a oneness in the relationship between Christ-followers and the Father and Son ('that they also may be in us'); horizontally, a unity in the relationships between Christ-followers themselves ('that they may all be one'). As this unity is pursued and realized, the impact is directed especially at those outside of the church. Indeed, the world witnessing the unity of the church is set to understand the Father's sending of his beloved Son out of his love for the world (cf. John 3:16).[30]

Through God's electing love and his purposes, the church is given a new identity as missionaries to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). The individual cannot be fully conformed to Christ and fulfill Christ's purposes without pursuing the communal and corporate nature of mission. The implications of this on the activity of communities will be expounded in the sixth

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[29]Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, loc. 3602–13.

[30]Ibid., loc. 4423–27.

chapter of this project.

Summary of Identities

Through God's soteriological actions, individual believers, small communities of Christians, and churches corporately are given a new identity, a new worldview from which we are to operate. No longer are we enslaved to consumerism, materialism, and individualism, but now we are disciples who worship and obey, we are family who love one another with brotherly affection, and are missionaries to sacrifice everything to make known the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Our identity will determine our activity.

Before focusing on the activities of missional communities, the next chapter will present a short consideration on the nature of discipleship to ensure that practices are understood in light of process.

CHAPTER 5

DISCIPLESHIP

Introduction

In chapter 3, the predominant worldview of an American Christian was distilled into three primary areas of idolatry. Chapter 4 presented a theological reflection on the nature of salvation and how it applies to the identity and function of the church. This fifth chapter will present a short philosophical foundation of discipleship and equipping the saints for the work of ministry particularly in an American church context to prepare for the sixth chapter, which will present a definition and practices of a missional community.

The Foundation of the Gospel

Any response to idolatry must be rooted in the gospel and the Word of God. The gospel is to be proclaimed, and the church needs preaching. As John Calvin states,

> Without the gospel everything is useless and vain; without the gospel we are not Christians; without the gospel all riches is poverty, all wisdom folly before God; strength is weakness, and all the justice of man is under the condemnation of God. But by the knowledge of the gospel we are made children of God, brothers of Jesus Christ, fellow townsmen with the saints, citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, heirs of God with Jesus Christ, by whom the poor are made rich, the weak strong, the fools wise, the sinner justified, the desolate comforted, the doubting sure, and slaves free. It is the power of God for the salvation of all those who believe.[1]

Any ministry to an idolatrous generation must, first and foremost, be sourced in the gospel of Jesus Christ. While there are many strategies to combat a worldview, without the gospel heralded those practical steps will ultimately fail. Through hearing the effectual call of the gospel, the elect are regenerated, adopted, and the work of

[1]John Calvin, "Preface to Olivétan's New Testament," in *Calvin: Commentaries*, ed. and trans., Joseph Haroutunian, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1958), 66.

sanctification begins. The gospel is the source of a new identity in Christ and therefore is the foundation of the mission and ministry of the church. This truth is unfortunately easy to forget.

Accepted, Assumed, Confused, Lost

For the American church to move towards a healthy, disciple-making, church planting movement, the gospel must form the foundation, and history must be a guide. A terrible cycle has happened throughout all of church history in virtually all movements: (1) the gospel is accepted; (2) the gospel is assumed; (3) the gospel is confused; (4) the gospel is lost. First, people receive the gospel with joy – they celebrate it and accept. In Acts 19, we see Paul enter into Ephesus, clarify some misunderstandings for the disciples there, and then spend two years teaching the gospel such that it goes throughout all Asia. The ministry of Paul caused quite a scene in Ephesus, but it is clear that there were disciples who loved the good news. Unfortunately, however, people are always tempted to move beyond the gospel. Moving forward to Revelation 2, Jesus commends the Ephesian church for their work, their love for one another, and their defense of the faith; however, he also rebukes them:

> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. (Rev 2:4-5)

The Ephesians had forgotten their first love. They were busy working for Jesus but had assumed the most basic truth of the gospel. Both the Galatian and the Colossian churches were dealing with this temptation to assume the gospel as well. Paul corrects each of them for adding something to the basic gospel. In general, once a church begins to assume the gospel, inevitably it will be confused. The gospel was Jesus plus something. For many of the people at The Austin Stone, acts of justice and mercy are mistaken for the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel can easily become "we should feed people." When the gospel is confused with its implications, disaster is inevitable for a

church. The final result of confusing the gospel is that the gospel is ultimately lost. Tragically, the region of modern day Ephesus, and much of the region Paul planted the early churches, could be classified as an unreached people group. Because these churches assumed and confused the gospel, there is no longer an active church today.

The story of the church is often the story of our hearts – accepting, assuming, confusing and losing the gospel. This is why Paul never assumes the gospel as he is instructing the churches he has planted. In the book of Ephesians, he spends almost one quarter of the book unpacking the truths of the gospel story. Ephesians 1 and the first half of chapter 2 unpack thoroughly the gospel of Christ in all of its cosmic, historical splendor. Paul reminds the Ephesians of a Sovereign God who sent his Son Jesus to die on a cross in order to adopt us into his family, redeem us with his blood, and secure us for all eternity with the Spirit. Paul concludes this glorious reflection on the gospel: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8-9). Church leaders are so easily tempted to assume that people know, love and act upon the gospel of Jesus. Subtly, vision, strategy and practice replace the gospel. Quite unintentionally, the gospel of churches pursuing missional communities and movement can become "it is by missional community you have been saved."

A Temptation for Leaders

At The Austin Stone, the ideas of movement and missional community were compelling, and the leaders of The Austin Stone began to miss the primary point – Jesus. Missional community was a tempting new idea, and without much thought was immediately put into practice. The Austin Stone rapidly gained notoriety for innovative ministry, and the tendency became to emphasize our unique vision, forgetting the foundation upon which it rested. We fell into a trap of thinking that people can get the gospel anywhere, but they can only get our vision here.

The inverse is true in the American church, however. Most churches are not lacking in some sort of vision. Almost every church has a mission statement, but often lack clear, passionate, and specific application of the gospel. Vision and strategy have no inherent power, but the gospel assuredly does. Vision is not unimportant and should be communicated – but only with respect to its proper place as a result of the gospel. I want to implore church leaders to learn from the mistakes of The Austin Stone – never assume the gospel. In pulpits, in core team gatherings, in elder meetings, or in any ministry environment – do not assume the gospel. Practically at The Austin Stone, we have decided to clearly articulate the gospel of Jesus Christ – his perfectly righteous life, his atoning death, and his glorious resurrection – every time we gather people together. The gospel is the foundation and the fuel for those who pursue mission, and must always take the position of prominence in the church.

The Insufficiency of Preaching Alone

The leaders of The Austin Stone preached the gospel faithfully from the pulpit each and every Sunday. The Austin Stone could sing the gospel in worship, but we were assuming it in every day life, and our people were confused about it. During a training for missional community leaders in early 2008, I decided to do a "gospel pop quiz." I was shocked to find out that only twenty percent of people could articulate the gospel – Christ's life, death, and resurrection for us. Considering that this could merely have been a fluke occurrence, I repeated the experiment several times over the coming year in a variety of different ministry environments. With very few exceptions, approximately twenty percent of the group was able to articulate the historical gospel of Jesus Christ. Many people either fumbled through a version of the 4 Spiritual Laws, or would rattle off random details they knew about Jesus.

To think that a church can accomplish the task of discipleship through preaching alone is a fool's errand. In general, preaching spends approximately one hour

per week working against a culture that is shaping disciples the other 167. In order to counteract culture, the church needs an everyday form of discipleship that is built upon the foundation of their identity in Christ and reinforces obedience to the commands of God.

The Necessity of Discipleship

The gospel of Christ must be held in high esteem in the local church and preached faithfully when the church gathers. However, in order for individual disciples and small communities of Christians to appropriate the gospel into real life issues, discipleship must be the active work of the local church. Simply to preach the gospel generally leaves the believer ill-equipped to apply the gospel and the Word of God to specific situations that they may encounter. While contextual pulpit preaching may be sufficient to address general issues in the life of the church, the fullest contextualization and application of the gospel takes place in the warp and woof of individual and communal life.

A small part of what makes the rapidly expanding movements of the gospel around the globe effective is the emphasis on every believer being equipped in the gospel and the expectation of applying God's Word into specific situations of life. The Lordship of Christ is not merely spoken of by an effective communicator, but it is enfleshed in the life of a Christ-follower and observed in the context of a community by an outsider. Having a structure and strategy that necessitates individuals and small communities be obedient to sharing the good news of Jesus fosters and reinforces the idea that every member of a church is responsible for her growth. Finally, these movements expect that individuals and small communities will take ownership of discipleship for themselves and invite those interested in following Jesus into the life of discipleship as well.

The American church does not just need to preach the centrality of the gospel; we must build structures and strategies consistent with our identities that reinforce the

necessity of every disciple and community fulfilling the Great Commission.

Seeking Understanding of the Person

In the current church culture, there is a tendency towards proclamation and systems building as the primary means of leadership. Both of those tools are incredibly helpful and necessary for organizational leadership, but often those systems can only accomplish a portion of the task of discipleship and leadership. There are two primary deficiencies with this kind of leadership. First, in order for preaching to remain sufficiently broad to attract an audience, the content is generalized to a wide audience, which requires the individual to have the motivation to respond to the message and work out implications on their own. Second, with respect to systems, they are often constructed inside of the current culture as a response to a problem, and therefore most often are syncretistic with culture rather than challenging the existing idolatries.

As mentioned previously, many churches rely on small groups to combat the idolatry of individualism and challenge their communities to radical generosity to counteract materialism. At the heart of most church systems, however, consumerism is left systemically unchallenged, providing a service where the individual attending church is merely coming to an event to receive some benefit from it. Systemic leadership must be willing to meet people where they are, but move them towards biblical fidelity and challenge the predominant idolatry of a culture.

In the same way, leading people on a personal level must involve hearing their individual story, understanding their worldview, and engaging persuasively through building bridges to a gospel-centered, Word-centered way of life. In current American culture, biblical leadership requires an understanding of individualism (the propensity to view oneself as an autonomous unit), materialism (the proclivity to find meaning and value in the accumulation of things) and consumerism (the heart's desire is driven by what one can receive from something or someone). These idolatries are the common

worldview of most American individuals, and therefore are also pervasive inside of organizations composed of these kinds of people.

Tri-perspectival Discipleship

The proclamation of the Word of God to his people who gather corporately on a Sunday is absolutely central to the mission of the church, but is insufficient in and of itself to accomplish the task of discipleship. Preaching is one aspect of a church faithfully calling her members to obey Jesus in the Great Commission. Richard Baxter highlights this incredibly well in *The Reformed Pastor*:

> It is well that they hear sermons; but that is not enough. If tutors would make it their principal business to acquaint their pupils with the doctrine of salvation, and labor to set it home upon their hearts, that all might be received according to its weight, and read to their hearts as well as to their heads, and so carry on the rest of their instructions, that it may appear they make them but subservient unto this, and that their pupils may feel what they aim at in them all; and so that they would teach all their philosophy in *habitu theologico*, - this might be a happy means to make a happy Church and a happy country.[2]

Baxter's charge to his fellow pastors was to labor in the effort of discipleship, primarily in the context of the home of the church member. Baxter labored in the effort not only of preaching, but in discipling his congregation in the knowledge of salvation in the midst of their very own lives. Yet even this perspective of discipleship is still limited, failing to embed the activity of discipleship into a community of Christians who had a shared sense of mission to make disciples. While the pastor has a responsibility to teach his flock with the Word of God even individually, the community has a responsibility to one another to faithfully be disciples together and a responsibility to the world to make disciples together.

Additionally, discipleship cannot merely be limited to the function of teaching alone, but must include shepherding the affections of the heart and foster obedience in

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[2]Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), Kindle ed., loc. 332–36.

action to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. Gregg Allison points out the necessity of comprehensive discipleship:

> Clearly, the goal of the church's discipling is to produce wholly devoted and fully formed Christ-followers who are characterized by orthodoxy (sound doctrine), orthopraxis (right practice), and orthopatheia (proper sentiment). Given such a lofty aim, it should come as no surprise that discipleship is a lifelong and multipronged intentional process. The church can never be done discipling its members, and it must adapt many resources and avenues in seeking to perform this task.[3]

Clearly the challenge of integrative discipleship is massive in scope and thorough in practice. Because of the immensity of the task, the complexity of culture, and the limited resources that exist in many churches, tackling this issue is daunting. At the risk of being reductionist, the final chapter of this project will suggest a basic means of fostering obedience. However, before creating a variety of practices, resources and environments for discipleship, it is instructive to consider what it means to cultivate orthodoxy, orthopatheia, and orthopraxis in light of the idolatry of American culture.

Equipping the Whole Person

Discipleship is helping to provide doctrinal and biblical instruction, processing through the appetites and affections of the heart, and tangibly giving steps of obedience to an individual, community or organization. The primary role of a leader is that of a teacher, of a shepherd, and of a coach – leaders instruct in doctrine, help form character, and give practical wisdom to foster action. Primarily, the task of the biblical leader who has an understanding of the individual is to equip the whole person—their head, heart, and hands. The biblical leaders adopts the role of teacher in communicating the truths of God's Word, of shepherd in helping a person understand the affections and emotions of the heart, and coach in providing practical steps toward obedience to Jesus. Biblical leadership does not simply content itself with singular attention toward one particular

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[3]Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), Kindle ed., loc. 11878–80.

role, but seeks to be faithful to lead through all the faculties of a human.

Ephesians 4:14-20 offers a compelling vision of Paul's desire for the Ephesian church to be rooted in the Trinitarian God. The words he uses to exhort the church involve "being strengthened in Spirit in the inner man," Christ "dwell[ing] in your hearts through faith," "strength to comprehend…and know the love of Christ" and that she would ultimately produce God's greater glory. Paul understands humanity is composed of several faculties, and biblical leadership involves leading in all facets. These faculties are often summarized tri-perspectivally as "head, heart and hands."

Instructing the head. "Head" knowledge is rooted primarily in the intellect. This is the type of knowledge that is associated with recalling facts, doctrine, and teaching. Head learners typically have a love for Scripture or knowledge and are able to affirm truths based on propositions or argumentation. Doctrine rooted in the Word of God is the primary content of biblical leadership, as it is "breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

If the typical American thinks of himself as an individualistic, materialistic consumer, then it would behoove the church to instruct that person in his new identities as a disciple, member of God's family, and missionary to people. Not only must discipleship present both the reality of culture and the teachings of Scripture which counter those false ideas, but church leadership must also teach the church what it means to act in accordance with proper thinking. Teaching must point Christians to a different way of living, including communal practices which will foster a way of living together in our culture. With respect to missional communities, the church must teach a set of practices that are theologically grounded, contextually applied into culture, and are simple, reproducible and transferrable.

Shepherding the heart. “Heart” knowledge is rooted primarily in the desire, will, or emotions. This is the type of knowledge that is often associated with shepherding, character, or relational care. Heart learners are often guided by feelings and are typically wonderful at shepherding the souls of those who are under their care. Things like worship environments make them feel closer to God, and whenever they read the Scriptures, they typically are attracted to verses that speak of positive things, with more difficult truths being bypassed. Simply to teach something as true ignores that most decisions of a human are driven by desire, not simply by reason. The biblical leader helps a person to understand what drives their affections, both positively and negatively, and thereby cultivates strong character rooted in sound doctrine.

Effective discipleship fosters environments that are conducive to the introspection of the heart and facilitate the proper orientation of the affections toward Christ. An event-driven strategy for discipleship often misses this facet of discipleship, leaving little room for processing the motivations of the heart. While actions and thoughts are often calculated and can follow a sequential process, the affections of the heart are often stirred existentially, relationally and environmentally. Affections and emotions often arise situationally and contextually, and therefore helping shepherd them requires some amount of spontaneous circumstances and a great deal of time.

Coaching the hands. “Hands” knowledge is rooted primarily in action, or tasks. This is the type of knowledge that would most closely be related to coaching, skills, or assessment. It is the application of the knowledge from the head and the heart toward actually seeing change. Where Head and Heart learners simply feel or think about doing things, Hands learners actually execute them. The role of a biblical leader is to not only teach the mind and shepherd the heart, but to equip and hold accountable to active obedience.

One major limitation to most discipleship environments is that obedience can

only be monitored through an assignment and report or assessment method. While these strategies can certainly assess the basic questions of whether an action was completed, and if so how well it was done, there is little room for nuance and insight. Effective discipleship and coaching requires observation in the context of ministry. To help someone become a more effective evangelist, it is far more effective to be with them when evangelism is occurring. To disciple a Christian father in leading his family, it is far more instructive to model leading your own family for him.

As it relates to materialism, a life on life model of discipleship affords the opportunity to observe and challenge one another toward greater generosity. It becomes difficult to hide rampant materialism when walking intimately with another person who knows the needs of your family.

Integrated Communal Discipleship

Holistic discipleship in the context of a local church clearly requires a robust approach with a variety of opportunities for formation. To pursue the kind of discipleship that was highlighted in the previous section, the entire community must be employed, rather than reducing discipleship to a simple set of programs. In his concluding arguments from *To Change The World*, James Davison Hunter highlights the necessity for the church to practice an integrated discipleship:

> Thus, when the Word of life is enacted within the whole body of Christ in all of its members through an engagement that is individual, corporate, and institutional, not only does the word become flesh, but an entire lexicon and grammar becomes flesh in a living narrative that unfolds in the body of Christ; a narrative that points to God's redemptive purposes. It is authentic because it is enacted and finally persuasive because it reflects and reveals the *shalom* of God.[4]

We need a fully formed, integrated approach that combats the idolatries of culture precisely because integrative discipleship produces a fully-formed people who reflect the

[4]James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle ed., loc. 3502–05.

glory of God in the face of Christ. The church must disciple the whole person as individual, participant in community, and member of a corporate church from their current worldview to a biblical worldview rooted in the gospel of Christ. To disciple effectively in a culture of consumerism, materialism, and individualism, the entire community must play a role in the formation of each individual, and formation must take place in a variety of times, places, and contexts.

As Francis Schaeffer reminds the church,

> Discipline in the church as in the family is not something that can be done in one great burst of enthusiasm, one great conference, one great anything. Men must be treated in love as human beings, but it is a case of continual, moment-by-moment, existential care, for we are not dealing with a merely human organization but the church of Christ.[5]

Church leaders must consider not simply how the programs that are offered accomplish the strategic objectives, but also thoughtfully employ the entire church community in fostering authentic relationships of love in the midst of real life. Love is the foundation and the culmination of faithful discipleship within the context of a local church, and Jesus reminds us of this fact in John 13:

> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

In his book *The Mark of a Christian*, Schaeffer reflected on the passage above saying "without true Christians loving one another, Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers."[6] Quite simply, the church will never be effective in evangelistic witness if the community of Christians lacks an authentic love for one another that is manifest in rich relationships. Adding to the thrust of the argument, Schaeffer reminds us "still we must never forget that the final apologetic

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[5]Francis Schaeffer, *The Church before the Watching World: A Practical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1971), 73.

[6]Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of a Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 29.

which Jesus gave is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians."[7] If Christian love is the final apologetic for the gospel, the church must strategically orient life around putting that apologetic on display. The following chapter, therefore, will develop a comprehensive structure for integrated communal discipleship that draws from the theological identity of a believer in Christ and incorporates tri-perspectival discipleship.

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[7]Schaeffer, *The Mark of a Christian*, 29.

CHAPTER 6

MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES THAT REFLECT SOTERIOLOGICAL IDENTITIES

Introduction

To this point, this project has reflected on the predominant worldview of American culture, explored the soteriological foundations of a believer's new identity in Christ, and presented a framework for comprehensive and integrative discipleship. This chapter will practically apply these ideas into a set of communal practices that result from these ideas and propose a model for integrative discipleship in the local church.

In his conclusion to a long discourse on the church's response to post-modernity, David Wells poses this challenge:

> The postmodern reaction against Enlightenment dogma will not be met successfully simply by Christian proclamation. Of that we can be sure. That proclamation must arise within a context of authenticity. It is only as the evangelical Church begins to put its own house in order, its members begin to disentangle themselves from all of those cultural habits which militate against a belief in truth, and begin to embody that truth in the way that the Church actually lives, that postmodern skepticism might begin to be overcome. Postmoderns want to see as well as hear, to find authenticity in relationship as the precursor to hearing what is said. This is a valid and biblical demand. Faith, after all, is dead without works, and few sins are dealt with as harshly by Jesus as hypocrisy. What postmoderns want to see, and are entitled to see, is believing and being, talking and doing, all joined together in a seamless whole. This is the great challenge of the moment for the evangelical Church. Can it rise to this occasion?[1]

The church must have a response that is not merely talk, but action. How can the church cultivate communities that provide this kind of embodiment of the message of the gospel? Unfortunately, Wells only poses the question. In fact, many theologians have pointed out the necessity of a practical response, but few practitioners have considered

[1]David Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), Kindle ed., loc. 4857–64.

deeply their arguments and applied them into the context of the local church. The culmination of this project is an attempt to foster communal discipleship practices which thoroughly challenge the pervasive worldview in a theologically robust manner.

Missional community is the appropriate, biblical response. What follows is a synthesis of what has been communicated thus far, a definition for a missional community, and a description of the core practices of missional communities that foster holistic, integrated, communal discipleship.

Missional Communities are Reflective of Identities

Missional communities are not primarily an event, although missional communities gather for events. Missional communities are not primarily a program, although The Austin Stone invests resources, communication, staff, and strategies into missional communities. Missional communities are a group of people committed to living out their identity in Christ together. As chapter 3 highlighted, the primary identities of a Christian are summarized as Disciple, Family and Missionary. Missional communities are therefore a collection of people who are committed to living out these identities together in shared rhythms amongst a particular people, time, and location.

Additionally, missional communities are designed to reflect these identities in a holistic fashion that challenges the predominant culture of individualism, materialism, and consumerism that is rampant in American culture. These communities pursue being disciples of Jesus together in engaging with the Word of God and reinforcing obedience to the commands of God. These communities pursue affections of worship and growth in character together, consistently reminding one another of the finished work of Christ. They battle for one another's hearts through consistently repenting of sin and fighting for faith in the work of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the sufficiency of the Word of God. Finally, these communities are committed to living on mission together to glorify God through making disciples of Jesus in their networks of relationships and

neighborhoods they inhabit.

Missional communities particularly emphasize the role of every participant in conformity to Christ, care for one another, and the work of ministry in the world. Each person is integral in pursuing the vision and mission of the community and maintaining mutual accountability to pursue intentionally and consistently members of the community and those who are not following Christ.

Missional Community Definition

Although definitions are limited in conveying the fullness of an idea, in summary a missional community is the following:

> a community of Christ followers on mission with God in obedience to the Holy Spirit that demonstrates tangibly and declares creatively the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a specific pocket of people.

Definitions are often only as good as the explanations that accompany them, so in this next section each portion of this definition will be expanded.

A Community of Christians

First and foremost, a missional community is a community of Christians. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has redeemed a people for himself whom he empowers and sends to be his witnesses, as we see in John 20:21 and Matthew 28:16-20. Particularly, a missional community is rooted in the framework of chapter 4 of this project. The community of Christians, because of the work of Christ, collectively see their identity as disciples, family, and missionaries. The community is not simply defined by mutual relationships, but by a shared identity.

Additionally, as Jesus indicates in John 13 and 17, the community of God is sent for a purpose. The community is called and sent to show a hurting, broken, and dying world that Jesus is who he says he is and did what he said he did. The purpose of Christian community has always been to demonstrate God's character to the world. A

missional community distinctly and intentionally orients their communal lives around God's greater purpose in the world.

On Mission with God

Because Christian community is committed to God's purposes, missional communities are motivated by and participate in God's mission for the world. God is committed to bringing glory to his name and establishing his kingdom and reign in the world. God has been doing this very thing throughout all of redemptive history, and a missional community sees itself as intimately involved in this activity. God is saving and blessing a people, a missional community, through the finished work of Jesus so that they would make disciples and bring his kingdom to the world around them. While there is considerable debate as to how Christians participate in bringing about the kingdom, the community is bound up in participating in God's mission in the world by making disciples of Jesus.

Most churches would not disagree with this particular issue. When it comes to working out practically what it means to make disciples, however, almost every church has a different definition and strategy. The Austin Stone, in particular, believes that the mission of making disciples should play out in two primary ways in *every* community, from large to small, and every individual.

Demonstrate tangibly. Christians - those who have been saved by grace through faith in Christ, adopted into God's family, and given a new mission to proclaim the good news - should live life differently. The first way a missional community participates in God's mission is by demonstrating the gospel tangibly. Just as Jesus came demonstrating the kingdom through selfless acts of service, missional communities actively look for opportunities to meet the felt and real needs of their neighbors. A missional community seeks to become a blessing to their neighbors and demonstrate the

reality of God's new kingdom.

The implications of the gospel for Christian community mean it is distinctively different than worldly community. Together, Christians image the kingly rule of God through serving tangibly one another and seeking the welfare of the entire pocket of people to whom they have been called. Part of having a compelling community that is an appropriate apologetic for the gospel of Jesus is demonstrating the kingdom through obedience to the word of God in meeting needs of both Christians and non-Christians.

Christians show the world what the kingdom of God is like when they love one another, serve one another, forgive one another, and care for one another in ways that are fundamentally different than the world. The "One Anothers" of Scripture are often referenced as the standard for how Christians are to do life together. Those who do not yet know Jesus are often simultaneously confused and compelled by the kinds of relationships that Christians have with one another. It is a compelling validation of the gospel message when Christian community is distinctly different in how they love one another.

Another part of demonstrating the kingdom is tangible acts of service and love to a missional community's neighbors and the city they inhabit. If a missional community is trying to share the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection with a pocket of people, then they will need to understand and address how to serve well. Missional communities will need to engage parts of the city where poverty is overt, brokenness is visible, and pain and suffering are evident on a local neighborhood level and a wider city level. Poverty and brokenness look different in various contexts. For some communities, the poverty may be relational, for some economic, and for some ethnic or demographic. A missional community is committed to identifying where pain and need exist, and seeking to address the problem through meeting those needs. When the church of God loves one another and their neighbors well, the kingdom becomes tangible, and the

message of the gospel is validated. Jesus, however, did not simply stop at healing and meeting needs. He consistently spoke a true message of great hope to those whom he encountered.

Declare creatively. Therefore, as communities patterned after Jesus' life and work, missional communities declare the gospel creatively. A missional community listens to and understands the stories of their neighbors in order to be able to tell the Gospel Story in ways that are Good News to those specific people. Missional communities wrestle with and understand how to speak the good news of Jesus' perfect life, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection in power in the context of their neighbors' lives.

A missional community cannot be faithful to Scripture without proclaiming Christ. The idea of "preach the gospel, and use words if necessary" simply will not do. A missional community understands and values the creative declaration of the gospel of Jesus, because the gospel is both the foundation for life together and the fuel that sustains life together. Missional communities absolutely need to serve their neighbors, but the most loving thing a missional community can possibly do is share the good news of Christ's life, death and resurrection to address eternal separation from God. A missional community values declaring the gospel because it is the best news in all of human history and puts that value into practice by sharing it with anyone who will listen!

Pocket of People

Finally, a missional community exists for a pocket of people. God's grace in Jesus is good news for those in the church and those outside the church – everyone needs the gospel! Just as the Father sent the Son to a specific time, place, and people, so the Spirit does with the church, sending her to specific groups of people. A missional community seeks to wrap their lives up with the network of people or neighborhood in

which God has placed them.

At The Austin Stone, a "neighbor" is anyone a person cannot avoid or anyone who has needs that the disciple has the resources to meet. A neighbor may be those who live next-door, co-workers, friends in recreation, or those who share affinity. A neighbor may also be someone with little in common, but whom God has placed squarely in a Christian's path or specifically called or commanded them to care for. A missional community is a community of Christians who have a common set of neighbors and are intentionally living lives among them for the sake of God's glory so that new disciples might be made.

Synthesizing Culture, Discipleship, and Identities

Although the definition of a missional community is important, it is sufficiently broad enough that it could be applied to various different kinds of churches and church activities. To summarize the argument of this project so far, cultivating multiplying disciples requires an understanding and challenge of the prevailing culture, a theologically formed conception of the church, and a clear process and framework for discipleship. These three pieces must then cohere into a set of practices, which challenge the prevailing culture, are consistent with Christian identity, and foster multiplication.

The Practices of a Missional Community

The believer, the community, and the church corporately have a new identity in Christ that we have summarized as Disciple, Family, and Missionary. A missional community applies our identity in Christ into communal practices. Briefly, missional communities at The Austin Stone, gather as disciples in a Life Transformation Group, gather as a family in a Family Meeting, and gather as missionaries in a Third Place. The desire to pursue integrated communal discipleship requires the foundation of the gospel, a strong commitment to identity in Christ, and the application of that identity into

communal practices reflective of that new identity. In the following sections, how the different of identities of a disciple are worked out in communal practices will be enumerated and explored.

Different Kinds of Gatherings

Of particular note before each practice is examined is that for any particular community, different kinds of gatherings are practiced. The predominant model of small groups often relies on a single gathering to accomplish all the facets of a communal life together, including the study of God's Word, fellowship with one another, intercessory prayer, and acts of service and evangelism. While this is a noble pursuit, the expectation of accomplishing all facets of discipleship through a single, often mid-week meeting is insufficient for the task. In order to challenge the consumer-oriented, event-based mentality of most American Christians, several different kinds of gathering the saints must be employed to shift the focus from event to relationship. To become a community committed to living like a worshipping family of missionaries requires more frequent and more varied mechanisms of gathering.

Additionally, for a movement multiplying disciples to gain traction, leaders should desire gatherings that foster obedience to God's word, not just knowledge acquisition. The practices and gatherings adopted ought to challenge a consumerism and help foster self-feeding from God's word. Simply put, a consumer should be welcomed into the practices, but should not feel comfortable remaining solely a consumer. Consumerism must be challenged by expected participation in the activity and relationships of a community over time. Lastly, a consumer must be challenged toward greater conformity to Christ as a disciple, as a member of God's family, and as a missionary.

In order fully to obey the commands of God throughout the New Testament, different kinds of gatherings must be built into communal rhythms to transition people

from a “small group” mentality. Any gathering or practice that The Austin Stone teaches or cultivates is therefore aimed at obedience that flows from our identity in Christ. Who we are will dictate what we do, and therefore what we do must reflect who we are.

Utilizing multiple kinds of gatherings fosters integrated discipleship because it provides for a variety of ways in which the gospel and the Word of God are integrated into relationships over the course of time. Participants in the community are able to engage others in various contexts at various times with various social interactions, which provides a far richer context for the observation of life and application of the gospel. While one kind of person may flourish in particular gathering, such as the extrovert in a room full of new people, other individuals may lack the opportunity for formation. Ensuring that different kinds of gatherings in different settings with different people are practiced gives more opportunities for different members to contribute to the community and be held accountable to the life of a disciple.

When a variety of communal gatherings are practiced in the context of a church that gathers corporately for Sunday worship, it also ensures more frequent touchpoints for discipleship, shepherding, and leadership. When multiple different gatherings are utilized in communal life together, the life of a disciple becomes more integrated into a community with rich, complex and deep relationships. It becomes increasingly difficult for obedience to Christ to become confused with simple attendance at an event and ensures that people are known and observed in a variety of contexts. Sinful patterns in the lives of disciples will become apparent, and opportunities for shepherding and leadership will increase. When a church practices this rich, complex life together, the outcome will be the contextualization of the gospel into neighborhoods and networks of relationships that are impossible simply through the Sunday pulpit. These practices will be explored in the coming sections.

Family Meal

The first regular practice of missional communities is to gather together for an extended meal. While this may seem like a rudimentary practice with little import in discipleship as a community, this could not be farther from the truth. In a culture where meals are often eaten in the small margins of time between activities, perhaps one of the most counter-cultural actions a community can take is to slow down enough to enjoy one another over a meal. Eating together is often a lost art for the American church and the American small group.

The small group movement laid a helpful foundation for gathering the corporate church into smaller groups that met in homes. While that effort to add a more relationally intimate setting cultivated a value for gathering weekly, the gathering typically was an event focused on a felt need. Whether that need was Bible study, crisis care, or simply the need for friendship, the primary reason for gathering was still rooted in consuming something from the community. Vital aspects of a sacrificial, Christ-centered community like "sharing as one had need" and intercessory prayer for one another are frequently pushed to the margins.

As argued in chapter three, when Christians believe the gospel, God adopts them into his family. Christians are in fact now brothers and sisters in Christ, not just transactional partners in learning. Most small groups are a far cry from resembling a family. If missional communities are primarily about fostering obedience to Jesus, what should a gathering look like? Obedience means that a missional community must act like a family. If obedience is acting like a family, what do families actually do?

Families share life around meals. The dinner table is a critical time for most families to connect, regardless of the culture. The centerpiece of a missional community seeking to be the family of God then ought to be a shared meal. The meal is an ideal environment to express the shared identity of Family. When the consumeristic orientation of felt needs is removed from the center of a gathering, the primary motive can shift

toward earnestly loving one another through conversation and shared life. With intentionality, real life conversation happens in real life situations.

Why a family meal? The idea of the table is of high importance for the Christian life. One of the earliest practices the early church adopted was breaking bread together (Acts 2:42), and some the most vicious theological battles that required the Apostle's attention found themselves focused on the inclusion of the Gentiles – matters that centered around food (see Acts 15:19-20; Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 10:31). Not only does food take on a central ethical role in the New Testament, but the idea of "table fellowship" is pregnant with meaning whenever we consider the reconciliation God has given us in Christ. Jesus is the bread of life (John 6:35) who has been given to any who would come to him, and those that do are satisfied.

When we consider the salvation accomplished for God's people, the table imagery only continues to come alive. Though we were enemies of God, He has pursued us and made us "table mates" so that we are now counted as friends of God, no longer enemies. As adopted sons and daughters, He provides us with the "living Word of God" in His Son Jesus – we are no longer orphans, but sons and daughters who are provided for by our gracious Father. In the Lord's Supper, the table is spread and those that desire to come taste and see that the Lord is good will surely not be cast out.

A meal, then, is a time for Christians to be nourished, and for nonbelievers to see the gospel in action. Nonbelievers not only learn about theological truths in a "Head" orientation, but also see believers actually participating in the gospel that has come alive in community. This, then, should be compelling for the non-Christian because she is brought near to the holiness, and loving-kindness of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, nonbelievers are welcomed and invited to come to table of God through seeing the love and hospitality at the table of the Christian community. It is no wonder then that hospitality is held in such high esteem, including being a Pauline requirement for

eldership (1 Tim 3:2).

Elements of a family meal. Although the title of the missional community gathering may be self explanatory, the first element of this gathering is an actual meal. From a practical perspective, the meal should consist of a community preparing a meal together, eating the meal together, and cleaning up the meal together. In an attempt to not be too prescriptive about forms, having a meal that is prepared together fosters the opportunity for extended conversation and participation. In general, it is critical for a missional community to see the meal as the primary purpose of the gathering, and to intentionally set aside time for intentional conversation with one another during this time.

In addition to the meal itself, missional communities are thoughtful and intentional about the conversation that takes place during this time. First, the participants in the meal ought to be considered. One of the major ideas of missional community is allowing those who are not yet Christians the opportunity to participate in the community meaningfully. If a non-Christian is present, part of Christian hospitality means considering how an outsider can meaningfully participate in the conversation. Rather than having a Bible study, perhaps it would be more appropriate to have each person share what their "highs and lows" were for the past week. This kind of accessible question provides a great opportunity for those who are believers to speak about God, the gospel, and the Word, while remaining an accessible question for anyone, regardless of faith, to answer.

In order to integrate the Scriptures in this environment, two possibilities work well. The first is for a member of the community to share a short devotion from their own time in the Word of God the past week. This has the benefit of instructing the community in how to study the Scriptures personally and also provides the opportunity for teaching if it is needed in the life of the community. Another beneficial option would be to have each person share a short excerpt from their devotions the previous week, which fosters the

concept that "when you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up." 1 Corinthians 14:26. Having each community member share what God is teaching them in their personal devotions cultivates the mentality that each person has the obligation to contribute to the life of the community through the Word of God.

Another regular rhythm to cultivate in the life of the community is the celebration of the Lord's Supper together during the course of the meal. The ordinance of communion is an ancient act of worship that Christ instituted two millennia ago for his church. Communion is a visible sermon to our own souls of the concrete promises of God, obtained for us by Jesus' death and resurrection, and an important opportunity for non-Christians to understand that it is through faith in Christ alone that they may participate in this rite of Christian worship.

In Jesus's ministry, he had the large group that anybody could join, but from time to time he brought them to critical decision points (Luke 18:18-24; John 6:52-66; Luke 9:57-62). This gave them the important gift of knowing that they were not part of Jesus simply because they liked being in the large group. They still had a major decision to make about him. Communion is a similar way to have a decisive conversation with someone who does not yet follow Jesus, as the Lord's Table is only for those who have trusted in Christ.

In the earliest practices of the church, our brothers and sisters in Christ celebrated communion with a meal at the centerpiece. Early in the meal, they gave thanks and broke the bread to initiate the meal, and to conclude they would raise the cup and remind one another of Christ's shed blood. In between was conversation and reflection centered around Jesus and his finished work. Missional communities should include this in their regular gatherings to reinforce that the community is at the heart of Christian discipleship.

Finally, following the conclusion of the meal, missional communities ought to take the opportunity to pray intentionally together. Missional communities can have a variety of methods for prayer, but I favor praying in a particular way. First, missional communities ought to pray through God's attributes and character. The opening statement of the Lord's Prayer is "Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name." Jesus teaches his disciples to pray by focusing attention on God himself, so missional communities spend time praying one by one out loud, simply worshipping God for who he is.

This is helpful for worship and also for discipleship. This prayer continues to help Christians remember the character of our God and be specific about all his attributes – his love, justice, holiness, independence, eternality, glory, beauty, mercy, and the many more things that God is. This discipline cultivates an ongoing understanding and affection for God, inciting our hearts to worship.

After considering the Lord God, the community should spend time repenting of sin. This practice helps to foster honesty as well as an ongoing recognition of our imperfection. Missional communities repent for of their lack of affection for God and confess sins of omission and commission against God and one another. Finally, missional communities conclude time by praying in thankfulness for the atoning work of Christ on the cross, and for the power of the resurrection to be more manifest in us to overcome sin and have an understanding of, affection for and obedience to God. This simple liturgy keeps the gospel central to communal life, and draws one another consistently to remember and reflect on the good news of Christ.

Finally, a missional community concludes their time praying by name for their neighbors, their city and the nations. A missional community intercedes specifically that God would reveal himself to those with whom they are seeking to share the good news of Jesus and that the powers and principalities of Satan would be undone. Missional communities pray for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done specifically in our

neighborhood.

The benefits of a family meal. The design of the Family Meal gathering fosters and reflects the reality of God's adoption in his family, challenges autonomous individualism, and reinforces communal submission and participation. The Family Meal teaches disciples in community that discipleship happens in the context of everyday life. Eating a full meal and practicing the liturgy referred to above as a small community often reveals the actual strength of relationships in a group. In order to succeed without the crutch of a consumptive event, a missional community must learn each person's story, vocation, and passions. Quite simply, a missional community will *need* to become friends with one another for this kind of gathering to work. The structure created does not allow for a false sense of community to form that is driven only by an event, but reinforces the necessity of shared relationships and shared lives to the endurance and effectiveness of the gathering.

Gathering in this way particularly challenges our idolatry of individualism in American culture. By regularly committing to gathering with people committed to Christ and his mission, and by expecting one another to have authentic relationships, this method combats the idea that we are autonomous individuals who make decisions without consideration for others. When a community takes on this practice of a Family Meal, the community over time will recognize the impact of decisions on the entire community. If a member chooses a particular activity over the communal meal, the entire community feels the impact of that absence. A crucial voice in the life of the community goes missing! Secondly, decisions about careers, moving to a new neighborhood, or activities that a family or individuals participates in have significant consequences to the life of the community. With the traditional small group model that depends on a study or a felt-need, the success of the group does not hinge nearly as much on the participation of the individuals. Missional communities expect people to participate in the family of God,

and thereby foster obedience to Jesus to live in light of our identity counter-culturally.

Life Transformation Groups

Missional communities also gather as disciples in Life Transformation Groups.[2] Again, missional communities gather to reflect their identities in Christ and missional community gatherings reinforce obedience to Christ and his Word. Chapter three of this project reflected on the identity of a Christian as a disciple. A disciple is one who worships God with the affections of the heart, specifically in the act of repentance and faith, and seeks to be conformed to the image of Christ as a learner. What would it look like to gather as disciples, and cultivate affections for Christ and growth in conformity to Him? What would it look like to study the Bible for obedience, not just information growth? Finally, how can a gathering reinforce self-feeding as a disciple rather than catering to consumerism?

While no gathering or strategy can overcome the wickedness of the human heart, certain means can be more conducive to confronting sinful patterns. Particularly, a Life Transformation Group reinforces that each individual participant is responsible to hear from God's Word and seek to obey his commands personally, cultivating a habit of self-feeding as a disciple. A portion of the liturgy in this gathering is also repenting of sinful affections and appropriating the gospel and God's Word specifically into areas of individual sin. Finally, the gathering fosters obedience to consistently pray for the lost and share the good news of the gospel by praying by name for those who do not yet know Jesus. A Life Transformation Group is a smaller group of two or three believers of the same gender that commit to meeting together weekly to hold one another accountable to faithfully being disciples of Jesus in every day life.

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[2]The term Life Transformation Group comes from Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples through Life Transformation Groups* (Church Smart Resources, 1999).

Why a Life Transformation Group? This weekly rhythm cultivates obedience as a disciple, and forms the backbone of missional community. It helps people go from being a consumer meeting a need to becoming a contributor to the life of a community. Also, this kind of gathering is the basic tool of disciple-making in that it is simple enough to utilize in discipleship of a not-yet or brand new follower of Jesus.

The elements of a Life Transformation Group. This kind of gathering exhibits three primary elements. First, a Life Transformation Group reinforces hearing from the Word of God and obeying the commands of God in everyday life. Particularly, a disciple should be reading God's word every day (Ps 1:2) and be held accountable to respond to the Word in obedience (Jas 1:22). One particular challenge in the American church is the lack of individual devotion to God's Word. For many Christians, their primary intake of God's Word happens through hearing a sermon, rather than reading the Word of God for themselves. The desire of a disciple of Christ is always communion with him, and learning to delight in his laws and commands. American Christians are often consumers of teaching on God's Word, while remaining woefully inept in feeding themselves from the Scriptures. To cultivate disciples in a consumer culture, a gathering of disciples must indeed teach the Word of God but also must reinforce self-feeding from the Bible.

Hear and obey. The basic curriculum of a Life Transformation Group is driving the individual participant to read a significant amount of God's Word, examine the teachings thoughtfully and critically, apply the truths of God's Word into their own lives, and then pray that the Spirit of God would effect change in their hearts. At The Austin Stone, the simple tool called "REAP"[3] was developed for this purpose. The

[3]The Austin Stone Community Church, "Bible Reading Plan," http://austinstone.org/resources/bible-reading-plan (accessed February 27, 2014).

"REAP" method consists of a bible reading plan, a simple bible study method, and a journal to record the insights of the disciple. The first portion of a Life Transformation Group meeting is for each participant to select a journal entry from the past week and share their learning from the Word of God and specifically how they sought to obey that particular portion of Scripture in their every day life. With two or three participants in a Life Transformation Group, a general guideline is to spend 15 to 20 minutes on this portion of the gathering.

Repent and believe. The second portion of a Life Transformation Group meeting is to repent of sin and fight to believe the gospel with one another. If the aim of a disciple is to orient the affections of the heart towards God particularly in repentance and faith, then a gathering of disciples ought to reinforce this particular identity and activity. In Rom. 6:11, the apostle Paul teaches the Roman church, "you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Critical to sanctification and living as a disciple is putting sin to death and proactively seeking to be alive to God in Christ by faith. Accountability groups in many modern expressions of church have an unhealthy bent towards introspection of sin while remaining anemic in the articulation and application of the gospel as an antidote for personal sin.

In a Life Transformation Group, the disciples seek to confess and repent of their disobedience and sin, but also to unearth the improper heart motivations and idolatrous worship behind those sins. The model of Life Transformation Group is to first identify an area of active sin using a set of diagnostic questions and God's Word (see Appendix 2). These questions help disciples see their sin for what it is, disobedience to God. The second part of putting sin to death is seeking understanding of the idolatrous affections of the heart. What motivations are driving a disciple to sin? At The Austin Stone, the four core idols of Power, Control, Comfort, and Approval are regularly taught, and it is shown how these "far idols" drive and motivate us to pursue sinful disobedience

to God. Teaching people a framework to understand why they pursue sin has proven to be immensely helpful in addressing the deep-seated affections of the heart which are still in rebellion to Christ. Once disciples have worked through identifying motivations, the final step in putting sin to death is actively to repent and turn from those idolatries. Disciples name the idolatry for what it is – false worship – and confess to one another the desire no longer to serve and worship that idol.

In addition to understanding the sinfulness of the human heart, disciples in a Life Transformation Group keep the gospel explicit and fight for worship and faith together. Disciples consistently rehearse the good news of Christ's perfect life, his atoning death, and his resurrection. The first step in fighting for faith is reflecting on Jesus' death and how he paid the penalty for our sin completely and fully. If a man is isolating himself from community, teach him that Jesus tasted the fullness of isolation from both God the Father and all of humanity as he suffered and died on the cross, so that man struggling in sin never had to be isolated from God and others. If a woman is selfish or conceited, teach her to have "the mind of Christ, who though existed in the very form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but instead humbled himself, even to death on a cross." If a business owner is struggling with control, teach him to realize that Jesus, the sovereign creator of all things, gladly gave up control and submitted himself to the will of the Father to crush him for the iniquities of the world. Reflecting on the death of Christ reminds disciples of the gravity of sin and the riches of God's grace and kindness in Christ Jesus to pay the penalty completely. Disciples become people who indeed have been forgiven much, and can therefore rejoice greatly and love much because they have been deeply and fiercely loved.

The most powerful weapon against sin, Satan, and death is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and so often we leave it on the table. So what does it look like to do this well? Robert M'Cheyne, the Scottish pastor who created the Bible reading plan we use in our

church, says it this way: “Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself take ten looks at Christ.” For each time a person confesses sin, he or she needs to look ten times at how Jesus perfectly obeyed on his or her behalf. If a husband has been angry or frustrated at his wife for not meeting his needs, he must remember that Jesus served the most selfish bride on earth, and never once did he succumb to bitterness or anger, but loved his bride perfectly. If a mother is at her wit’s end with her children and without patience for them, she must remember Jesus, who when he was interrupted by children who wanted his attention perfectly loved them and played with them. If a college student is struggling with depression and failure in an area of life, he or she must remember that Jesus endured a colossal disaster in earthly terms of his ministry – all his friends abandoned him, the crowds left, and he was killed on a cross, but never once did he cease to give God the glory and rejoice in his failure and suffering. For a young man fighting sexual temptation, remember that Jesus was around prostitutes often, but never once did he look on one of them with lust, but only as a beloved sister whom God wanted to redeem from sin. The key to counseling others well with the gospel is to know the perfection of Jesus, and fight to believe that even though someone has sinned, they stand before God with the perfect record of Jesus.

Finally, in fighting to believe the gospel, we want to remind ourselves of the promises of God that are all “yes” in Christ Jesus. We can cling to the hope of God that although our lives seem broken and beyond repair, that He is indeed making all things new. When our whole life is falling apart, and we have been betrayed or hurt by someone, we can trust that God is indeed working all things for the good of those who believe. When we have believed the lie that we are too wicked and sinful to receive His grace, we remember that blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. The promises of God remind us of the hope that is to come, and encourage us to persevere in the grace of God.

Consider and pray. The third portion of time in a Life Transformation group is to consider opportunities disciples have to declare and demonstrate the gospel and pray by name for lost people. This particular activity in the gathering fosters specific application and accountability to evangelistic action. Not only are the disciples who participate considering the posture of their heart in worship, but they are challenging one another towards proactive obedience in sharing the good news of Christ's death and resurrection, and demonstrating tangibly the reality of God's kingdom to a specific person or people. This is integral to a missional community's life together in that it keeps people the priority. A missional community is intentionally seeking to make disciples, and this environment is where those people become real names with real stories and real challenges.

Why two or three participants? As the leadership at The Austin Stone continued to clarify the vision for what Life Transformation Groups looked like, they came to the conclusion that limiting the groups to two or three led to the most ideal outcomes. Whenever the number exceeded three, the groups often faltered in the main purpose of the time – namely, Hear & Obey, Repent & Believe, and Consider and Pray – and instead either became another social hour or took up a large amount of time. The small size maintained the necessity of each individual disciple regularly participating, but when the group expanded to four participants, the gathering became dominated by one voice of the stronger leader, thereby limiting mutual participation.

Additionally, those who are confessing their sin feel generally comfortable in a smaller setting of a few trusted relationships. When more people are introduced, the product was often a general discomfort about being honest in front of more people. All things being equal, this was why we found two or three to be most effective. When a Life Transformation Group has four participants, the leadership of The Austin Stone facilitates a conversation about multiplication into two groups of two people over a period of time.

Third Place

Finally, missional communities gather as missionaries in a Third Place. Up to this point, a missional community has only reoriented a typical small group with a Family Meal and cultivated obedience-based discipleship with the Life Transformation Group. A Third Place is where a missional community becomes intentionally missional – oriented towards pursuing people who are not yet followers of Christ. Without intentionally making time for people outside the community, little effectiveness in mission will occur. Very few Christians naturally drift into mission.

A missional community must ask what it means to gather to reflect their identity as missionaries and obey Jesus together. Obedience means gathering for the sake of people who do not know Jesus. Often small communities focus on serving together in a ministry, perhaps once per month. For a missional community, serving together is integral to the mission of making disciples, but insufficient to pursue mission fully. Mission is about people, not projects. A missional community must think through methods to integrate people into their life together, not simply serve anonymous people with whom there will be little evangelistic opportunity. Missional communities need to create a Third Place – a place to introduce friends who do not know Christ to others in their community.

Why a Third Place? The purpose of this third place will be to create neutral ground where non-Christians can interact with the members of a missional community. In an increasingly secularized culture, more and more people are showing little interest in attending a church service or any programming related to church. A missional community recognizes that the Family Meal and the Life Transformation Group, in addition to a Sunday worship service, are not environments that are primarily oriented towards lost people they are trying to reach, and therefore intentionally create a space that is neutral ground to invite the lost. The community of Christians plays a powerful role in

validating the message of the gospel (John 17:21-24), and mission is part and parcel of what it means to be a distinctively Christian community. Therefore, missional communities seek to overlap their Christian relationships with their non-Christian relationships intentionally in environments outside those oriented at believers.

The Third Place is yet another place for non-Christians to see gospel come alive. Most non-Christians will find themselves belonging to a friend group before they repent of their sin and believe the gospel. The Third Place is the locus of where this happens. Various non-believing friends of the Christians are brought in and are embraced as friends by the community as a whole. The hope is that each believing member of the community would know each other's non-Christian friends.

What makes an effective Third Place? An effective third place consists of three core components: neutral ground for non-Christians, natural to the rhythms of life, and regularly practiced over the course of time. An effective Third Place is neutral ground that is informal and non-committal and requires no previous relationship or knowledge to participate. The sole purpose of the gathering is to foster relationships with non-Christians over a shared activity or shared affinity. Also, a Third Place gathering naturally fits into the rhythms of those with whom the community wants to share Christ. The community practices intentional and thoughtful engagement in places where people already gather or have no significant barriers to participate in a gathering. Finally, the community is regularly committed to this particular place or gathering, consistently inviting people to participate with their Christian community in sharing life, serving needs, or meaningfully participating in the activities of a neighborhood, town or city.

The natural question that proceeds from the idea of Third Place is "where do missional communities gather for a third place?" A Third Place will be determined by the pocket of people the missional community is attempting to reach with the gospel. Missional communities ask the question, "where can we bring an outsider that will be a

natural place for them to meet and enjoy my Christian friends?" Additionally, a missional community asks "where can we gather *regularly* and *naturally*?" Is it at a park with mothers of young children? A restaurant or pub where people in that network or neighborhood routinely frequent? A particular sport that is prevalent in the city? To answer this question well demands that a missional community has a clarified purpose and mission to a pocket of people.

What ultimately makes a Third Place effective is the presence of people who do not know Jesus, the presence of a Christian community, and natural conversation that is intentional to move towards the gospel. A Christian should never be ashamed of the gospel and always be prepared with a defense for the hope they have, but Christians also ought to consider how to communicate the gospel contextually to the people with whom they are interacting. At The Austin Stone, our leadership has found it incredibly beneficial to encourage missional communities that are practicing Third Place to avoid "insider talk" like theological jargon or Christian vernacular that may be unintelligible or unhelpful to a lost person. To an outsider with no relational context, often insider language can be confusing, exclusive, and even intimidating. Particularly in a Third Place, Christians are trying to connect with the lost in a meaningful way to foster ongoing relationship, as well as seek to understand how to communicate the good news of the gospel and the Word of God into specific circumstances of life. Good missionaries adopt a posture of listening and learning before proclaiming the truth of God's word.

The benefits of Third Place. A Third Place creates space where someone can participate in a Christian community, experience relationships centered on the person and work of Christ, and meaningfully interact with Christians before they have to believe the message of the gospel. Perhaps the greatest benefit of practicing Third Place in communal life together is that the entire Christian community is involved in evangelism. Proclaiming the good news of Jesus no longer rests solely on the shoulders of a single

individual, but a person who does not know Jesus will hear the gospel from a variety of people in a variety of ways over the course of time. Perhaps that person will encounter a story of God's grace that closely matches their current circumstances from another member of the community. Perhaps a lost person will open up to a person gifted in mercy, but also will heed wisdom from a person with the gift of knowledge. This kind of intentional communal mission leverages the plurality of gifts that God has given to his church and brings them to bear not only on the gathered Christian community, but also into the lives of those who have not trusted in Christ. Mission becomes integral to the community and everyone participant of a missional community can play a significant role in witnessing.

Additionally, gathering in this way challenges the prevalent materialism of American culture. Gathering for at Third Places challenges missional community participants to contribute more of their time and financial resources to engage those who are far from God. Rather than participating in an activity that a church leader has planned, funded and executed, the community is providing the resources for this kind of engagement simply from what God has blessed them with. Part of the rampant materialism in American culture is the idea of "return on investment". If a person contributes to an effort, there is an expected effective outcome. Matching financial investment with time investment in a relational manner affords the opportunity for people in the church to experience the costliness of ministry and mission, and generously to give resources away to those who quite possibly would never return a favor. The missional community who practices regularly serving and engaging the lost begins to realize the radical generosity of Christ, who sacrificed all the wealth of heaven to come and rescue a rebellious people. Additionally, the missional community is regularly confronted with the reality of stewarding their resources in light of the mission of God.

A Suggested Rhythm for Missional Community Practices

In addition to regular participation in corporate worship on Sundays, The Austin Stone is teaching these small missional communities to gather in three additional ways: a Family Meal, a Life Transformation Group, and a Third Place. Initially when casting vision for these practices, The Austin Stone Leadership encountered resistance from congregants. Primarily the challenge to this vision for church life seemed unattainable given the hectic schedules and current structure and rhythm of many communities. To gather an additional two times per week beyond a Sunday worship service and a routine gathering of the community simply seemed out of reach for many. Over time, The Austin Stone has found two critical teaching points to help missional communities overcome this barrier.

The first is to continue casting a vision for integrated, holistic discipleship through missional communities, but to help people understand they are in the process of pursuing this as a community over time, rather than expected to enact these practices immediately. In training environments, we often teach people that missional community is not less than a meeting, but it will also demand more participation than a single meeting per week. Additionally, in as much as possible, The Austin Stone leadership teaches communities to identify what activities they are currently doing in their lives, and then seek to integrate Christian community into those activities. If a family is already participating in recreational sports, what does it look like to invite another family from the missional community to participate as well? If a member of the community is regularly gathering with a group of people who do not know Jesus, how can he or she invite a member of the community to join in? One of the keys to living these rhythms of missional communities out is "living your normal life with gospel intentionality" and inviting your community to take part.

While different communities and missionary contexts have different rhythms

of life, in general The Austin Stone has found a prevalent rhythm that has been effective for fostering both mission and community. For a given misisonal community, rather than focusing on the activity of a given week, the framework of a month has been more instructive. In adopting these gatherings, we additionally encourage missional communities to consider that they do not have to happen the same way all the time. Furthermore, not every member of a missional community needs to be present every time the community gathers. In the same way a nuclear family has different seasons of life and different needs at different times, so too do missional communities.

The rhythm we suggest is to gather weekly for corporate worship on Sundays with the members of a missional community. While The Austin Stone has several different locations and times for services, the regular rhythm of worshipping together and sitting under the teaching of God's Word is an essential time for a community to be unified together and experience the reality that they are part of a larger Christian community. The second rhythm is for each disciple to gather weekly in a Life Transformation group. The primary emphasis of the healthiest missional communities at The Austin Stone is on Life Transformation Groups precisely because they reinforce the basic discipline of discipleship in individual life. These gatherings are the non-negotiable heartbeat of effective missional communities over time.

For the Family Meal, the suggested rhythm is at minimum once per month. Finally, for the Third Place we suggest a gathering at minimum of every other week. Missional community life does not have to be rigorously structured each and every week, but to have a structure that fosters regular rhythms over a month is particularly beneficial.

Integration Accomplishes Holistic Discipleship

The integration of these practices together into a regular rhythm creates a construct of holistic discipleship to occur. Because the individuals who compose a community committed to these practices sees one another in a variety of places and

times, different strengths and weaknesses will emerge. Also, the spiritual disciplines are integrated into a community on mission, where they not only are comprehended intellectually but are applied and can be observed over time. These practices, when synthesized together over time, foster an environment where discipleship occurs thoroughly in everyday life situations. Particularly, this strategy increases the likelihood of the entire life of a disciple being submitted to the lordship of Christ in their thinking, feeling, and doing. This strategy also creates an environment of expected obedience to the word of God and the Holy Spirit in the everyday margins of life. Finally, this strategy fosters multiplication through allowing every member of a community to play a significant role in making new disciples of Jesus as missionaries.

Conclusions

In this project, I argued that missional communities present a compelling, holistic strategy for discipleship in an American context. Particularly, chapter 2 focused on the limitations of a popular model of discipleship through small groups. Chapter 3 looked at the predominant worldview of many Americans. Chapter 4 constructed theological identities in light of soteriology, and chapter 5 presented a holistic view of discipleship. This final chapter synthesized these ideas into a definition and practices of missional communities. As with any written piece, the topics presented could have been explored far more exhaustively, but my prayer and desire is that the reader is provoked to further study.

Two primary conclusions emerge from this project. First, the forms of discipleship must reflect the core theology of the church. Second, the forms of discipleship must challenge the predominant idolatries of the culture.

As argued in chapter 4, a disconnect often exists between how the saints are gathered and their fundamental identity in Christ. Church leaders who equip disciples for the work of ministry must employ methods that are thoughtful and deeply theologically

rooted. Additionally, repentance from sin and faith in Christ must be cultivated in the personal disciplines of a saint, the practices of a community, and the gatherings of the church corporately. These different environments all must foster and reflect the new identity of believers in consistency with the teaching of scripture for each. Fostering the practices of missional community outlined in chapter 6 keep the full identity of a Christian as a disciple, family-member and missionary consistently worked out in the life of a community. Few other strategies in the American church today seek to integratively and holistically cultivate these identities in the context of a small community.

Secondly, the practices of discipleship must challenge the prevalent idolatry of culture, rather than inadvertently capitulating to it. Without a clear understanding of the underlying motivations of many individuals in American culture, several pastors and leaders have thoughtlessly employed tools for discipleship that simply exacerbate the problems of consumerism, individualism and materialism. The forms of discipleship in many churches are actually counteracting the desired ends of healthy, mature, multiplying disciples of Jesus because they foster dependence and perpetuate immaturity. Missional communities present a strategic, thoughtful approach to counteract the culture of consumption and expect disciples to act in consistency with their new identity in Christ. When coupled with a healthy corporate gathering where the word of God is preached and the saints of God worship, missional communities present a superior vehicle for cultivating healthy, multiplying communities of Christians that make disciples. The strategy of missional communities is an exceptional method for seeing the Great Commission fulfilled in America.

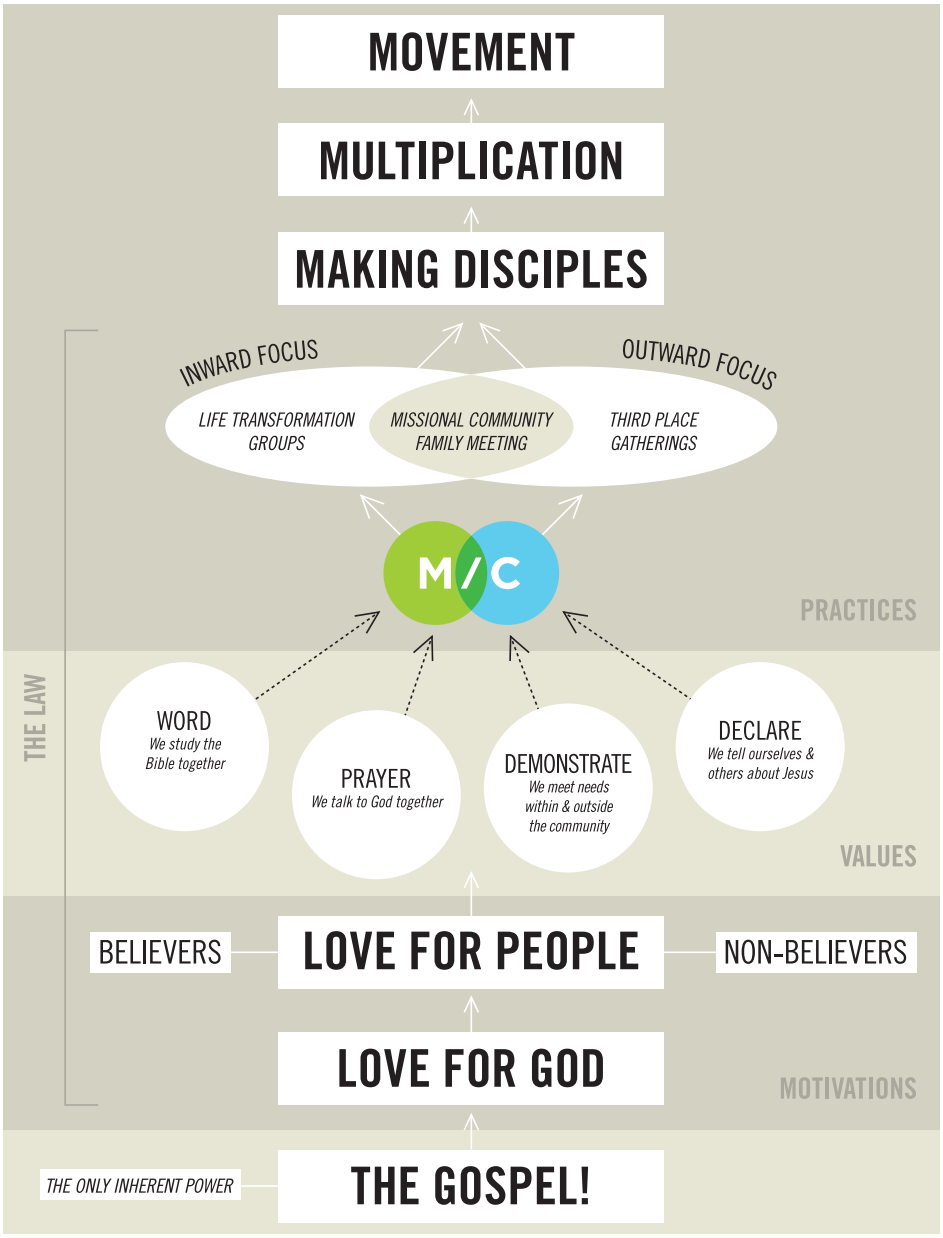
Although the scope of the project did not cover the implementation of this strategy in a local church context, a few brief words are in order. First, for churches who are pursuing this kind of gospel-centered community on mission, may this project serve as an exhortation to stay the course, though the work is difficult. For churches and leaders

who are currently utilizing a model of ministry critiqued in this project, my sincerest apologies if I have misrepresented your heart and mind in designing your ministry strategy. I exhort you, however, to consider the strategy for disciple-making employed in light of the arguments I have presented here. In love, I pray that they are helpful to you in leading the local church towards greater fidelity to Christ and effectiveness in the Great Commission. If your church leadership is considering a change to a missional community approach, I exhort you to take a great deal of time in the transition, graciously and patiently walking alongside the saints entrusted to your care. May you lovingly shepherd the flock of God towards practices that are reflective of our theological identity in Christ and deliberately challenge the prevailing idolatry of culture.

Finally, no ministry strategy exists to overcome the wickedness of the human heart, the lust of the flesh, the darkness of the world, and the power of Satan. Discipleship at the core is a supernatural work of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, founded in the word of God, and culminating in the worship of Jesus Christ. The vehicle of missional community is simply a means by which the word of God and the Holy Spirit are brought to the center of the life of a disciple, a community, and a church. Missional communities are not a silver bullet for cultivating healthy disciples, but they are a tool for the church that Christ may be more faithfully worshipped and obeyed. To Christ be the glory now and forever, amen!

APPENDIX 1

VISUAL ROADMAP FOR MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES



APPENDIX 2

LIFE TRANSFORMATION GROUP GUIDE

LTG's are simple. You're going to do three things every week – Hear and Obey, Repent and Believe, and Consider and Pray.

Hear and Obey

Each person shares what they have heard from God in the 15-30 chapters of scripture they read the past week (look at "How To REAP" on the other side of this sheet for help in studying the bible). Then share about how you can obey what you have learned from the bible.

Repent and Believe

Each person spends time repenting of their sin. Sharing how you have sinned against God this past week (the accountability questions on the other side of this sheet can help this process). But then spend time speaking out loud to yourself and to one another the good news of Jesus' work for us. Hearing the gospel spoken out loud enables us to believe.

Consider and Pray

Talk about how your relationship and spiritual conversations have gone with your non-believing friends. Share how you plan to weave this person into your community. Then pray for them by name for God to save them.

List some people you are praying for…

Name	Opportunity

Accountability Questions

These questions are to be asked of each member of your LTG. Not every question has to be asked, but be as thorough as necessary. This is a safe, honest, vulnerable and confidential environment.

1. How has your anger or fear or anxiety or addiction shown up this week? How does that reveal what you're trusting in besides God? What truth or promise of the gospel do you need to hear and believe to trust in God again?

2. How have you wasted time?

3. How have you felt yourself resisting to obey God this week: in your mission to the lost? In your sacrificial love for community?

4. In light of God's love toward you, do you need to reconcile with somebody? Are you subconsciously holding a grudge?

5. How have you battled sexual or intimacy temptation and how are you preparing to deal with it next week?

6. How has the Holy Spirit been testing and growing you this week? Did you respond in faith or grumbling?

7. Is anything (school, work, technology, etc.) isolating you from important relationships?

8. _____ (Your personalized question)

The REAP Method

Read

Find the passages for today's reading in the Bible Reading Plan. Read the passages with an open heart, asking the Holy Spirit to give you words of encouragement,

direction, and correction (2 Timothy 3:16). Underline the verses that seem important and that God is using to speak to you.

Examine

Spend some time reflecting and writing about what you've read. Write down one or two of the key verses that stuck out to you. Ask yourself these questions and write down your thoughts:

1. What is going on in the passage?

2. Who is writing and who is he writing to?

3. When was the author writing? What are the circumstances that the author is addressing?

4. Does the writer mention any- thing that might indicate his purpose or intent?

5. How do you think the author wants his audience to respond?

Apply

After examining the passage, apply the text to your own life. Ask yourself these questions:

1. What is God's word for me from this passage?

2. How will I live differently and be different today because of what I just read?

3. What are the things in my life that need to change in light of this truth?

Pray

Pray through the passage and your application, asking God to change your heart and to change your life, based on the time you've spent in God's Word.

An Example of REAP

Here is an example of using the REAP method to read and study your bible.

Read

1 Kings 8–9: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27 ESV)

Examine

Solomon builds the template and brings the Ark of the Covenant into the holy of holies, but he realizes that God cannot be contained by a house made with human hands.

Apply

I will not treat God as if He’s only present in a church building on Sundays. Rather, I will acknowledge that He is everywhere and seek to dwell in His presence wherever I go and wherever I am.

Pray

God, forgive me for believing that you are smaller than you really are. Give me faith today, and help me to believe that you are truly everywhere.

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ABSTRACT

MISSIONAL COMMUNITY AS A MODEL FOR INTEGRATED DISCIPLESHIP IN AN AMERICAN CONTEXT

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This project argues that missional communities present a compelling integrated model of discipleship in American culture. Chapter 1 provides an understanding of the purpose and goals of the project as well as a brief survey of The Austin Stone Community Church. Chapter 2 explores the predominant model of small groups in the American church and their potential limitations in light of gospel movements. Chapter 3 examines the underlying worldview of American culture, particularly as it pertains to consumerism, materialism, and individualism. Chapter 4 explores the theological underpinnings of missional communities. Chapter 5 presents a strategic approach to discipleship, develops a framework for a tri-perspectival approach to discipleship, and illustrates how missional communities can integrate the model over an extended period of time. Finally, chapter 6 applies the preceding work into a practical definition of missional communities and a communal framework for discipleship practices.

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