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**The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in  
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## **PURPOSE**

At the end of Jesus's earthly ministry, he left his newly formed assembly of apprentices with a command. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...." (Matthew 28:18-20) He promised they soon would receive the presence of the Holy Spirit, then left his apprentices in charge.

The church at large has done many things with that command, but unfortunately exploring the disciplines, conscious activities that will aid in the spiritual formation of a disciple, has been woefully lacking. Jesus' command was to make disciples; not converts, not social justice agents, and not moralists. Granted, a true apprentice of Jesus will embrace and celebrate such things as fruits of his or her journey. But we cannot presume that these outward results create inwardly transformed disciples. Throughout his teachings, such as the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5-7) Jesus emphasizes that inward transformation causes outward fruit, not the other way around.

As Dallas Willard puts it,

The acid test for any theology is this: Is the God presented one that can be loved, heart, soul, mind, and strength? If the thoughtful, honest answer is: 'Not really,' then we need to look elsewhere or deeper. ... If it fails to set a lovable God—a radiant,

happy, friendly, accessible, and totally competent being—before ordinary people, we have gone wrong. We should not keep going in the same direction, but turn around and take another road.<sup>1</sup>

This paper attempts to examine how spiritual disciplines can be used as tools for inward transformation. Specifically, I will address how understanding and taking hold of spiritual disciplines can aid in the formation of the character of Christ within the local context of Cornerstone Community Church, in Columbia, Maryland. Dallas Willard puts the objective well,

... to bring apprentices to the point where they dearly love and constantly delight in that 'heavenly Father' made real to earth in Jesus and are quite certain that there is no 'catch,' no limit, to the goodness of his intentions or to his power to carry them out.<sup>2</sup>

## **THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes it clear that grace is free, but it is not cheap. The grace of God is unearned and unearnable, but if we ever expect to grow in grace, "we must pay the price of a consciously chosen course of action which involves both individual and group life. Spiritual growth is the purpose of the Disciplines."<sup>3</sup> If someone claims to be a follower of Christ, but no evidence of transformation has taken, or continues to take place in their life, one might wonder how this

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<sup>1</sup> Willard 1998, 329

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 321

<sup>3</sup> Foster 1998, 8

person has assumed the role of an apprentice to Christ. To truly know and journey with Him will naturally effect change.

A definition of a spiritual discipline is “an activity in our power that we do to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort.”<sup>4</sup> Spiritual disciplines are habits we take on that help enable us to take on the character of Christ. They are tools that help aid us to live like Christ. The result is a well-directed life that allows for spiritual and ministerial growth. Spiritual disciplines allow us to do as Colossians 3:5-17 teaches us to do, to put off the old person and to put on the new. They help us to live the eternal kind of life Jesus intends for us to live.

*The Divine Conspiracy Study Guide* summarizes things well with this statement:

Becoming a continual student of Jesus—being guided, instructed, and helped by him in every aspect of life—leads to an inward transformation. Not only will love characterize the core of my personality, but I will live my life as Jesus would live it if he were me with my job, relationships, physical body, and financial circumstances. As a disciple, I make other disciples by communicating who God is and the nature of the kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

The effect of this introduced discipline is to enable people to do what needs to be done, when it needs to be done and as it needs to be done.

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson/Matthews 2001, 71

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 89

The apostle Paul says, "he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. "This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit."<sup>6</sup> They allow us to harvest what God has already implanted within us. The Holy Spirit is always there to nurture and direct, but like a farmer; we must participate in cultivating what has been planted within us.

A disciple then is a person who has decided to be an apprentice of another person. The hope is that the follower will then become more capable than he ever could have become on his own. The hope of the mentor is that the disciple will then carry on, through what the person has become, in a much better way than he could have without the time invested.

When one chooses to follow Jesus, and enjoys the continual presence of the Holy Spirit, there is an even more powerful effect than one could achieve with a human mentor. As Willard says of Jesus,

...he lives in the kingdom of God, and he applies that kingdom for the good of others and even makes it possible for them to enter it for themselves. The deeper theological truths about his person

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<sup>6</sup> Foster 1998, 7

and his work do not detract from this simple point. It is what he calls us to by saying, 'Follow me.'<sup>7</sup>

Our motivation to take on spiritual disciplines is the attraction of living and reflecting the light of Jesus. A follower of Jesus is an apprentice of Jesus. As his apprentices, we learn from him how to lead our lives.

Dallas Willard says in *Hearing God*,

God wants to be wanted, to be wanted enough that we are ready, predisposed, to find him present with us. And if, by contrast, we are ready and set to find ways of explaining away his gentle overtures, he will rarely respond with fire from heaven. More likely he will simply leave us alone and we shall have the satisfaction of thinking ourselves not to be gullible.<sup>8</sup>

The problem is not God's unwillingness to be in relationship with us.

Rather, it is our unwillingness to remove barriers and to be disciplined to pursue him. It is ultimately a value problem on our part.

Spiritual disciplines allow people to move from good intention to actuality.

For example, many people desire to have healthier bodies with muscle tone and less fat, but they are unwilling to live the lifestyle that would make that possible. To accomplish this requires a certain amount of physical discipline. A similar kind of physical discipline is also required for the spiritual realm.

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<sup>7</sup> Willard 1998, 282–283

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 219

Unfortunately, some of our historical church leaders, particularly during medieval times, saw the body as purely evil. This bad theology has carried into today's world. This is a major challenge that my colleague Esdras Kelly, a pastor in Santa Rosa, Dominican Republic, constantly encounters. Churches are not dealing with the physical tragedies going on in this under-resourced community, nor are they encouraged to talk about physical disciplines, even those that are "spiritual" in nature. This is so because the body is believed to be purely evil. Thus, Pastor Esdras is criticized by other local churches when he engages anything that deals with the flesh. When he leads the community in social justice issues or even social events, anything that improves the physical life, he is told that is not his purpose as a pastor. On the flip side, discipline of the flesh without the guidance of the Holy Spirit is legalism. There is nothing wrong with disciplining the flesh or even bringing joy to the flesh, as long as it is being done for the purpose of the Kingdom of God. It is when the flesh is disciplined for discipline sake, or brought pleasure for pleasure sake, that the purpose has been lost.

Dallas Willard describes this tension between flesh and spirit this way:

The spiritual and the bodily are by no means opposed in human life—they are complementary. We here explicitly disown and condemn any suggestion to the contrary, because it is the

spiritual life alone that makes possible fulfillment of bodily existence—and hence human existence.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, physical discipline is something the apostle Paul understood very well. In Paul's letter to Timothy he presumed that Timothy recognized the value of having a physical trainer to help the body to advance. Dallas

Willard says:

In his advice to Timothy, Paul's points out that there is a precisely parallel phenomenon in the spiritual realm and draws upon that parallelism in his statement. And it's a very workable analogy. Because just as with the physical, there is a specific round of activities we must do to establish, maintain, and enhance our spiritual powers. One must train as well as try. An athlete may have all the enthusiasm in the world, he may 'talk a good game.' But talk will not win the race. Zeal without knowledge, or without appropriate practice is never enough. Plus, one must train wisely as well as intensely for spiritual attainment.<sup>10</sup>

Disciplines of the spirit channel the flesh as we consciously direct our bodies to reduce or remove the hindrances to serving God, and as we move ever closer to serving righteousness as naturally as we previously served sin.

Understanding disciplines and practicing them can be two different realities. Even with the best effort, spiritual disciplines are hard to integrate into one's life. So many Christians live defeated lives because they have little understanding of spiritual growth. As Richard Foster

writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Willard 1991, 75

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 98

Our ordinary method of dealing with ingrained sin is to launch a frontal attack. We rely on our willpower and determination. Whatever may be the issue for us—anger, fear, bitterness, gluttony, pride, lust, substance abuse—we determine never to do it again; we pray against it, fight against it, set your will against it. But the struggle is all in vain, and we find ourselves once again morally bankrupt or worse yet, so proud of our external righteousness that ‘whitened sepulchers’ is a mild description of our condition.<sup>11</sup>

However, with a proper understanding of the disciplines, under submission to the Holy Spirit, we can focus ourselves more on the mystery of God than on the mystery of how to practice the disciplines. So many Christians live defeated lives because they have little understanding of spiritual growth.

Before spiritual disciplines are introduced into one’s life, it is helpful to understand what spiritual disciplines are not. As William Temple taught us, if our concept of God is radically false, then the more devoted we are, the worse the outcome will be. Therefore it is important that we not allow what is meant for good to be the very thing that drives us away from a healthy life.

For example, spiritual disciplines are not law. They are meant to serve us, not to be served by us. They should be loosely held. We should see them as tools to achieving a healthy focus, not as the purpose of our lives. If we are not careful, the means could become the end and we could begin

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<sup>11</sup> Foster 1988, 4

to believe that we exist to serve the discipline itself. This makes the discipline a god. The disciplines are not righteousness within themselves.

Disciplines should become resources that help us do what we are already motivated to do, to have an inner transformation and take on the character of Christ.

Christ wants you to keep fit, to play the game, to be an athlete, and to lay aside everything that might steal away your fitness for the greatest, and therefore the most strenuous, game in the world. And you will not need evidences of the power of Christianity. You will become one yourself. Such people are real Christians, and there is no dirge about *their* Christianity failing. It's the most glorious thing in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Spiritual disciplines are not about perfection, they are about growing. As an avid skier I would say that a good day on the slopes has a minimum of five falls. That is how I know I have pushed myself to the limit. Spiritual disciplines can be very similar. If you have not failed, you are likely in the rut of routine. Growth requires failure.

Disciplines do not make a person more spiritual. If we see disciplines as external duties then we become slaves to them and our inner motivation is guilt and shame. Dallas Willard teaches that such unhealthy views of spiritual disciplines turn the gospel into a "sin management" effort, rather than a transformational relationship.

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<sup>12</sup> Weatherhead 1990, 62

It is also helpful to understand that spiritual disciplines should not be strictly forced into a twenty-four hour period. A heroic attempt to embrace all the disciplines at once only makes us slaves of the disciplines. We should not attempt to be over-achievers and attempt all of the disciplines at once. Some disciplines can be done daily, some weekly. Others might be done monthly or yearly. Each apprentice of Jesus, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, should determine which disciplines should be applied, and when, to best move into alignment with the heart of Jesus.

There are many examples of spiritual disciplines, and no one list should be thought of as complete and self-contained. Dallas Willard, in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, offers a helpful approach. He classifies and groups spiritual disciplines, separating them into two categories. First, there are the disciplines of abstinence: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice, watching, etc. Second, there are the disciplines of engagement: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, submission, etc.

Not only does Jesus give us a new vision of God's universe, but he gives us a new vision of ourselves. ... Jesus shows his apprentices how to love in light of the fact that they will never stop living. This is what his students are learning from him'. An apprenticeship to Jesus is about the lifelong process of the transformation of our total being—spirit, body, and soul."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson/Matthews 2001, 30

### **MINISTRY CONTEXT CHALLENGE WITH REGARD TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**

A brilliant theologian who can take the subject matter of spiritual formation and is able quote every desert father who has ever written, but who can neither bring application to a real world context, nor teach someone who can, is limited at best. Now that the theology behind spiritual formation has been established, before the practical application can be examined, it is crucial to understand the bridging context of the culture that is ministered to.

Cornerstone Community Church serves a bedroom community in the Baltimore/Washington, DC corridor. Most of the parishioners are white collar, upwardly mobile and have household incomes well into six figures. They spend long hours at work followed by long commutes in traffic. Many hold positions of influence, which consequently makes them powerful in the eyes of the world. Fewer than 9 percent of Howard Countians participate in any kind of religious service, including all religions, on any given weekend. There is much discretionary income, though most have a considerable amount of debt. Historically, the predominant religious influences of this area are Catholicism and Judaism. Most of the people of Cornerstone come with this background.

There are several challenges to this culture. They want it all, but are too busy to give time toward what needs to be done. Even though many have earned advanced degrees, they know little about Jesus. They struggle with pride, which impedes their willingness to admit that they don't know what they need to. They have nice homes, but won't let people into them because they are embarrassed that it reveals their lack of perfection. They are dual-income families and feel their kids must be involved in everything and must have the things they perceive their neighbor's child has. They are also highly compartmental in their lives, as their jobs are just one piece of a big picture. They work tirelessly at their piece of the puzzle and expect that someone else will handle all of the other pieces. Therefore the most overused resource they have is their energy. Teaching this community spiritual formation is a bit of a challenge. They are not bad people. They truly desire spiritual things. They just desire everything else as well. To them, churches that provide hip and exciting presentations and request minimal commitment are attractive. The challenge in serving this group is to be culturally relevant without sacrificing biblical principles.

There are two overarching challenges with this community. The first can be defined in one word: entitlement. Most struggle with a sense of entitlement; they work hard and deserve the best. There are few luxuries; they deserve everything they have. They have done their part,

others should do theirs, now give them their prize. One of the things that has most hindered the path of their discipleship is the belief that it will be much too difficult and it could potentially ruin their lifestyles.

The second is tangibility. They would prefer that spirituality be purely mystical so they can justify not engaging with, nor understanding, God and community.

The challenge then is how to create spiritual formation in a way that is understood, yet not in a controlled box. Programs that provide certificates would imply that they had *arrived*, which could lead to a whole different set of issues. Yet minimal structure creates something too overwhelming to achieve, thus won't be attempted at all. Dallas Willard puts it well when talking about the necessity of a curriculum for Christlikeness:

One must recognize that numerous programs in local congregations and wider levels of organization are frequently spoken of as discipleship programs. We do not wish to detract from the good they do, and they do much good. Here we have in mind everything from Sunday school and special courses and seminars to Twelve Step programs and various types of national movements...However, the emphasis all too often is on some point of behavior modification<sup>14</sup>

The hope is to create a way to form discipleship with training that enables his people to do what Jesus said in a regular and efficient manner.

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<sup>14</sup> Willard 1998, 315

**BACKGROUND: INTEGRATING SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN A LOCAL MINISTRY CONTEXT**

Most students in this Doctor of Ministry program have likely tried their hand leading their churches to spiritual formation. I am no different. After wrestling with the realities of my local context, I created what I called: Spiritual Portfolio. Most of this community has a portfolio of some sort, perhaps multiple portfolios. A portfolio is dynamic in nature. It presumes that there will be down times, thus there are areas to help counterbalance those times. It is also presumed that not all things can be done all at once, thus it is assumed that you will work on parts of it at a time. Finally, it presumes that each piece is a part of a greater purpose.

In the portfolio I created two landmarks for the spiritual journey, salvation and baptism, and six essential tools of discipleship. As a disciple journeys through life there are six areas they should always be developing: prayer, bible study, service/stewardship, community, multiplication and corporate worship.

Each parishioner is encouraged to examine their own spiritual journey and see where the Holy Spirit is prodding them to develop. The idea is that it gives a reference point for others to engage with them to examine together how they are doing on their spiritual journeys.

I would call the effort a good start, but it lacked key areas that this seminar helped me to develop. It lacked a visible theological foundation. To be certain it was fine theologically, but there was no reference to the theology. This course helped me to develop the theology behind the concept. Next it lacked strong application. It was kind of like a firecracker. It had a big bang but soon become a distant memory. This course helped me think through the continual practical application to it. This course also helped me think through the various disciplines established, and the six essentials became seven essentials, for reasons listed below. Finally, the course deepened my spiritual walk, which has allowed me to take the Spiritual Portfolio concept to a deeper level.

### **AWARENESS OF LIMITATIONS**

As previously stated, there are some great advantages to approaching spiritual disciplines in this fashion. There are, however, some serious limitations to this approach. Certain presumptions have been made.

It has been presumed that the apprentice of Christ has made an inward determination to transform his character to become aligned with Christ. Furthermore it has been presumed that, while people may have explored spiritual formation, they either have not gone into great depth or they have had a narrow focus rather than a holistic approach. Finally it has been presumed that a more extensive approach would be overwhelming

to the person. The basic ideal behind this work is that people will embrace each of these core disciplines as an integral part of their lives. If a person should desire to go further, wonderful resources are available.

A sampling of areas not set apart formally are disciplines such as abstinence, chastity, fasting, silence and solitude. Consequently, disciplines such as these have been loosely woven into the disciplines that have been set forth. For example, teachings on abstinence have been referred to in areas such as stewardship and service. Silence and solitude are being modeled in corporate worship. Fasting is referred to in the section of prayer.

The hope is that the following three things will happen. First, the basic core disciplines, as determined by the author, are made tangible and will become foundational to the apprentice of Christ. Second, enough references to other spiritual disciplines ideally will “whet the appetite” of the apprentice, challenging him or her to explore more deeply in specific areas as needed. Finally, for the maturing apprentice, who has explored many areas of disciplines, this will become a useful resource that will remind him or her of the basic essentials.

**SPIRITUAL LANDMARKS OF THE DISCIPLE**

The Great Commission calls us to “make disciples” not decisions.

Concentrating on decisions made toward salvation is a very narrow view of the gospel. Decisions, admittedly, are an important part of one’s spiritual journey and they do have to be made as growth continues.

Accepting Jesus as Lord of one’s life, which means accepting the gift of forgiveness offered from the resurrected Jesus, is the most important of those decisions. But in the disciplined spiritual life, that decision is not the sole focus because salvation is not just forgiveness, it is an entirely new order of life. The apostle Paul taught us in Romans 6:4 “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” To be an apprentice of Jesus is to sign up for an entirely new way of life. To accept salvation is to be rescued from the dominion of darkness and to be transferred into the Kingdom of God, which is made possible through Jesus’ purchase of our freedom and forgiveness of sin, as found in Colossians 1:13-14.

If, ultimately, everyone is on a spiritual journey of some sort, then a natural question to ask is which path are you on and what are you doing along the way? God wants us all to be on a journey that leads us into a deeper relationship with Him. He sent His child, Jesus, to make this possible. Jesus told his followers to “go and make disciples.” Another time

He told them that if they did nothing else, they should love God with all of their hearts, minds, souls and strength, then radically love others. This is probably the best way to sum up the purpose of the Church.

We must, in fact, do nothing less than engage in a radical rethinking of the Christian conception of salvation. What does it mean to be 'saved?' ... Is it possible that, ... we've lost touch with the root meanings of concepts that would make grace and human personality fit like hand in glove when it comes to the process of Christian discipleship?<sup>15</sup>

Salvation then, is a necessary landmark for the Christian spiritual journey. In order for Christ to be formed in a person, He must first enter into the life of the new disciple. A decision then has to be made to accept this free invitation.

Another landmark of the spiritual journey is baptism. Without presenting the lengthy debate of infant baptism versus believer's baptism, the sacrament of baptism taught at Cornerstone Community Church is the believer's baptism. Baptism is an outward expression of an inward decision to become a follower of Christ. This is not only the new believer's opportunity to express to the world their embracing of a new life; it fulfills the command of Christ as well.

When a new disciple establishes these two landmarks, it is not an expression of perfection, but signifies that a new path has been taken. As Dallas Willard comments:

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<sup>15</sup> Willard 1991, 32–33

Even if we waver and turn back to the 'old person' upon occasion, we still are able to do otherwise. People without the new life have no choice. But we have a new force within us that gives us choice. In this sense we are free from sin even if not yet free of it. Doing what is good and right becomes increasingly easy, sweet, and sensible to us as grace grows in us.<sup>16</sup>

## **ESSENTIALS OF A DISCIPLE**

Coach Vince Lombardi, famous for turning bad football teams into champions, would often hold the pigskin ball up and say, "This is a football." The point? It is not about how many programs a disciple takes on, but about doing the basics well. The listing of disciplines that follows is not intended to be all-inclusive. Many wonderful spiritual disciplines do not appear here. The intent is to provide a beginning point so that the apprentices of Christ in Cornerstone who long to be on journey with God can hold this imagery up and say, "This is a disciple. This is what a healthy, authentic, growing relationship with God can look like.

Jesus advised his followers to build their foundations on a rock, not on sand that blows away with the first storm that comes along. Taking on spiritual disciplines will help the believer move beyond hit-or-miss Christianity that just dissipates at the first sign of stress or difficult times. To experience an authentic, growing, life-changing relationship—one that weathers storms well and is built to last—requires a solid foundation.

Cornerstone exists to help build a solid foundation for healthy disciples.

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<sup>16</sup> Willard 1991, 115

The Spiritual Portfolio is a toolbox we use to establish and maintain that foundation.

On a final note, every individual is different. No cookie-cutter process fits any two people in any area. Just as no two people have diets or wardrobes exactly alike, neither would they have identical discipleship packages. Each person is expected to pray and determine the right “package” suitable to his or her particular season of life. Every disciple of Jesus Christ should pursue each essential area. The degree to which we pursue them depends upon the individual. Ideally, every disciple would at all times fully emphasize each of the seven, but that is rarely possible.

For each discipline a theological construct will be developed, followed by a practical application at both corporate and personal levels.

At Cornerstone Community Church, when speaking of spiritual disciplines we have used the phrase *essential tools for discipleship*. For each essential tool we have assigned an action word that corresponds, as well as an icon. Each of these will be defined in the practical application sections.

## **ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR DISCIPLESHIP: PRAYER**

### **Theological Construct of Prayer**

Our sanctification does not depend upon changing our works, but in doing that for God's sake which we commonly do for our own...It is a great delusion to think that the times of prayer ought to differ from other times. We are as strictly obliged to adhere to God by action in the time of action as by prayer in the season of prayer.<sup>17</sup>

Prayer is conversation with God, a dialogue that is expressed aloud or within thoughts. Prayer is rarely engaged in isolation of other spiritual disciplines and spiritual activities, especially study, meditation, and worship, and often solitude and fasting as well.

It is through prayer that the disciple experiences the personhood of God.

The disciple is free to communicate words of need, fear, praise, adoration, confession and whatever else the Holy Spirit brings to the heart. In return, God listens and responds in many ways, including conviction, circumstance, a word spoken to the heart, a result, a directive of patience or any other form He sees fit. Sometimes the greatest gift in return is the listening ear alone.

Richard Foster teaches in the *Celebration of Discipline* that prayer thrusts us onto the frontier of the spiritual life. Of all the Spiritual Disciplines prayer is the most central because it ushers us into continuous

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<sup>17</sup> Lawrence 1996, 84

communion with the Father. A follower of Christ cannot walk away from the presence of God unchanged. The natural result of prayer is change.

Bonaventure studied the spiritual life of Saint Francis of Assisi. Saint Francis was once quoted saying, "Divine aid is available to those who seek it from their hearts, humbly and devoutly; ... Let us pray, therefore, and say to the Lord our God: lead me, Lord, in your path, and I will enter in your truth. Let my heart rejoice that it may fear your name."<sup>18</sup>

Calvin developed a deep understanding of what it means to be in the presence of God.

To *prayer*, then are we indebted for penetrating to those riches which are treasured up for us with our heavenly Father. For there is a kind of intercourse between God and men, by which, having entered the upper sanctuary, they appear before Him and appeal to his promises, that when necessity requires, they may learn by experience, that what they believed merely on the authority of his word was not in vain.<sup>19</sup>

This interaction between God and human brings fulfils the longing built into every soul to be connected to the Creator. As a part of that connection, the nature of God brings transformation and ministry to the human soul. Meister Eckhart notes that "The soul will bring forth Person if God laughs into her and she laughs back to him."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bonaventure 1978, 59-60

<sup>19</sup> Calvin 1960, 146

<sup>20</sup> Johnson 2001, 40

Brother Lawrence insisted that, to be constantly aware of God's presence, it is necessary to form the habit of continually talking with him each day. To think that we must abandon conversation with God in order to deal with the world is flawed. Instead, as we nourish our soul by seeing God in his exaltation, we will derive a great joy at being his.<sup>21</sup>

As previously noted, many spiritual disciplines can partner with prayer to transform the disciple of Christ's heart and communicate to the soul. Meditation is one example. In meditation we are growing into what Thomas à Kempis calls 'a familiar friendship with Jesus.' Sinking down into the light and life of Christ becomes a more habitual way of life. The continuous presence of the Lord moves from a theological dogma into a radiant reality. "Words from the old hymn 'He walks with me and he talks with me' ceases to be pious jargon and instead becomes a straightforward description of daily life."<sup>22</sup>

Prayer requires a process of growth. Olympic swimmers do not set their records without practice, often through years of discipline. "P.T. Forsythe says, 'Prayer is to religion what original research is to science.' I felt I was engaging in 'original research'; in the school of the Spirit."<sup>23</sup> As in the sciences, practice and experimenting is required for prayer. Where would we be if Thomas Edison quit experimenting at the first failed attempt?

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<sup>21</sup> Lawrence, 1996, 12

<sup>22</sup> Foster, 1998, 19

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 38

In truth, at times a disciple will need to see prayer as work. It is not a good practice to wait until we feel like praying before we pray for others. As with work, we may not feel like praying until well after we have begun. We may not feel like training for an athletic sport, but once we play for a while, we feel like doing it. In the same way, our prayer muscles need to be stretched, limbered, and massaged until the blood-flow of intercession begins. Then we will find that we feel like praying.

A wise engineer studies the laws of flowing water and builds his water system in accordance with those laws. A wise scientist studies the laws of nature and adopts his experiments to those laws. And a wise seeker after God had better study the laws of God and adapt his prayers to those laws.<sup>24</sup>

Even though prayer may be challenging at times, we should not carry a heavy yoke trying to pray. When Abba Macarius was asked how one should pray, The old man replied,

There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hand and say, 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.' And if the conflict grows fiercer say: 'Lord, help.' He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.<sup>25</sup>

John Climacus is even more direct: "When you pray do not try to express yourself in fancy words, for often it is the simple, repetitious phrases of a little child that our Father in heaven finds most irresistible."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sanford, 1972, 9

<sup>25</sup> Nouwen, 1981, 80

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 80

## Practical Implementations of Prayer

The action word we have assigned for prayer is *intimacy*. The icon is a puzzle piece. In a recent devotional sent home after worship service the following description was included: The puzzle piece represents intimacy with God. From the beginning of time God created us for relationship with Him. Prayer links us with God and keeps us interconnected with Him.

Post- Spirituality and Ministry Seminar 2006 with Dallas Willard and Keith Mathews, we strived to include more teaching and modeling of prayer in our corporate worship time. The challenge was to help make prayer more tangible. While prayer enjoys a fair amount of mystery, our goal was to remove unnecessary obstacles including fear, confusion and excuses.

One way we modeled this during our worship time was including times of silence and solitude. Being asked to pray silently, with no music in the background, can be unnerving to some people. It is more silence than they heard all week. As we learned from Thomas à Kempis, Saint Francis of Assisi and others, silence and solitude can govern our pace, slowing us until we are prepared to experience the presence of God. The duration of a silent prayer time may be fewer than five minutes, yet this stretches many people. It also models what can be done at home.

During some Sundays we taught on prayer and had people practice it more during the service itself. For example, recently we taught the simple

mnemonic device of A.C.T.S. as a way to pray. After teaching each section, we paused the teaching time and experienced together that form of prayer.

Post-seminar we challenged people to be more proactive about prayer in their personal time. One thing we learned from the early church fathers is the value of icons, tangible things or art forms to remind us of the teachings of the scriptures. As previously mentioned, we sent each attendee home with two puzzle pieces to remind them how they are intimately connected with Jesus. We also sent home a prayer journal. Various prayer ministries sprouted throughout the year, but none of them was very strong.

Over the next year there are areas we hope to focus upon. We have found that making the worship services more experiential also makes them more meaningful, so we plan to grow in that area. We would like to build a time in the service for prayer testimonies, both live and video. For example how a prayer was answered or the joys and challenges someone has had in their prayer life. Having people available to pray with or areas created just for prayer is something that would foster prayer. We are also considering having small group breakout sessions in the middle of the worship time for the purpose of prayer. Something we have done years ago that would be meaningful to reestablish is prayer

walking through our communities. Prayer retreats are also being considered. Our desire is for the next year to create more venues that foster prayer.

## **ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR DISCIPLESHIP: WORD OF GOD**

### **Theological Construct of the Word of God**

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. (Phil. 4:8-9)

God's Holy Word has been given to us as a gift. Spending time in the written and spoken Word of God is our opportunity to better know him and his will for our lives. What we study determines the kinds of habits we form. What we ingest will affect the core of who we are, and consequently the outward person. This is why Paul argues for us to focus on what is pure, lovely, true, noble, and praiseworthy. Nothing else allows a disciple to do that better than God's Word.

Disciples should not only read the Word, but meditate on it. Psalms 1:2 says, "But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he

meditates day and night." "Meditation is devotional; study is analytical. Meditation will relish a word; study will explicate it."<sup>27</sup>

We not only read and hear and investigate, but we meditate on the text before us; retreat into silence with a prayerful and an in-depth focus on the scriptures, praying. "... that God would meet with us and speak specifically to us, for ultimately the Word of God is God speaking."<sup>28</sup>

It was recorded that Bonaventure, who studied under Saint Francis,

... meditates on Christ as the beginning, the middle and the end of the journey, but in each case he focuses not on the historical Jesus in concrete details of his earthly life as an example of moral virtue, but on the mystical Christ who opens the deeper dimensions of the soul and leads to union with God.<sup>29</sup>

We learn from John Calvin that God's Word is limited when "it merely flutters in the brain, but when it has taken deep root in the heart, and become an invincible bulwark to withstand and repel all the assaults of temptation."<sup>30</sup> A disciple needs to allow God's Word to infiltrate the heart.

God's Word was meant to penetrate our lives and make an internal transformation. God's Word was meant for relationship between himself

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<sup>27</sup> Foster 1998, 64

<sup>28</sup> Willard 1991, 177

<sup>29</sup> Bonaventure 1978, 35

<sup>30</sup> Calvin 1960, 501

and his followers. "Calvin Miller well remarks: 'Mystics without study are only spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort.'"<sup>31</sup>

Ultimately, what should be sought from the scriptures is truth and how to profit from it. Profit here is meant to be in accordance with God's plan for us, not with an eye to create control or dominance. "If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned."<sup>32</sup>

### **Practical Implementations of Worship**

The action word we have assigned is *transformation*. An apprentice of Christ is encouraged to approach the Word of God anticipating the he or she will be transformed. The Word of God, his spoken word, will penetrate and change us from within.

Post Ministry and Spirituality seminar we strove to include more teaching and modeling of the Word of God in our corporate worship time. For example, not only did we teach the value of studying the scriptures and why they are reliable, but we had a service that led the congregants through interpreting a passage for themselves. Each service we picked a different passage and brought people on stage who were unaware of what the passage was going to be. They were then taught, together with the

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<sup>31</sup> Willard 1991, 23

<sup>32</sup> à Kempis 1952, 7

congregation, basic questions to ask when approaching a scripture text. After each question was asked, they, and the congregation, were given times of silence to answer the question about the passage. Then the passage was discussed on the stage. At the end of the service the parishioners were encouraged to take their newfound tools and begin reading the scriptures at home. Just like John Calvin taught, the Word of God was not meant to “flutter the brain but to take deep root in the heart”.

Post seminar we strove to include more teaching and modeling of study in personal time as well. The icon the congregants were given was herb seeds. They could watch the seeds grow, and as they see the plant transform they are reminded of the transformation that the Word of God brings. Once the plant is fully mature, the transformation is still possible, as the herbs can go into foods and enhance their flavor. The community has also been given tools in take-home sheets on how to study the Bible, as well as more in-depth resources posted on our web site. Parishioners are encouraged to use those resources to ingest God’s word on their own. Finally, we have some small groups that have been focusing on studying specific passages of the Bible.

Over the next year there are areas we hope to focus upon. First, we plan to do a lot more of the same. The resources we have been using seem to

be effective. We will probably launch a concept called "Soul Café," which will encourage large groups of people to do short-term studies. We may do an experiential series on the names for God, where we set out to experience the qualities that each chosen name represents. Another idea we are playing around with is to promote a challenge chapter: encourage people to read through a chapter in the next week, write their thoughts and e-mail them to the church. We will then roll those into a message to be given three weeks after the passage was introduced. This will tie into a message on natural approaches versus process-driven tools for Bible study. The hypothesis behind this is that we are all naturally wired to want to know more about God and his Word.

## **ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR DISCIPLESHIP: COMMUNITY**

### **Theological Construct of Community**

Healthy community has two necessary dynamics that must go hand in hand. The first is positive group values. To thrive a community must honor the values of authenticity, humility, openness, serving one another and must share as a major purpose the act of doing life together. The second dynamic is surprising. Healthy community demands time for solitude for its participants.

Before healthy community is examined, a few words about dysfunctional community may be helpful. What our western culture has developed

under the banner of community is not biblical community. Having surface level relationships with little awareness of a person's internal struggles and burdens is not community. Having relationships built around a hobby, social structure or one that is for personal gain is not healthy community. Finally, just pursuing community for fear of being alone will become disappointing. "Then they blame the fellowship for what is really their own fault. The Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium."<sup>33</sup>

Healthy community requires authentic relationships. Since loving God and loving one's neighbor are really the same thing, Brother Lawrence regarded those around him with the same affection he felt for the Lord. "He believed that his was what Christ expressed in the Gospel: that anything he did for even the humblest of his brothers would be counted as being done for Jesus."<sup>34</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke much of the value of community. He also spoke about why one should value community.

Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Foster 1988, 76

<sup>34</sup> Lawrence 1996, 93

<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer 1954, 20

Bonhoeffer also taught that the very definition of Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. "Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ."<sup>36</sup>

There are many ways to for Christians to encounter authentic relationships through the act of doing life together, but none is so effective as confession. In confession we let trusted others know our deepest weaknesses and failures. This will encourage our faith in God's provision for our needs through his people, our sense of being loved, and our humility before our brothers and sisters. Confession allows for complete transparency. Bonhoeffer observes:

In confession, the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him; and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown.<sup>37</sup>

Confession relieves us of the need to hide or manage what was told to whom. Life can be more energizing without the draining necessity to manage deceit. Through confession "we engage and are engaged by others in the most profound depths of the soul."

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 21

<sup>37</sup> Bonhoeffer 1954, 112

Healthy community, does though, require time for solitude. The fear of being left alone often petrifies people. Bonhoeffer says, "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. Let him who is not in community beware of being alone."<sup>38</sup>

A person has very little positive to give if the person has not taken time to be alone and reflect. As community requires speech, solitude requires silence and, as Bonhoeffer puts it, "Silence and speech have the same inner correspondence and difference as do solitude and community. One does not exist without the other. Right speech comes out of silence, and right silence comes out of speech."<sup>39</sup>

### **Practical Implementations of Community**

The action word we have assigned to community is interdependence. We are teaching the rich value of being interdependent on each other.

Post Spirituality and Ministry seminar we strove to include more teaching and modeling of community in our corporate worship time. The message was delivered by a woman, Terry Bouma, on Mother's Day. She taught on the man who was lowered through the roof on the stretcher to the feet of Jesus. At the end of the service we had a time where the women of the church could come up to a stretcher. They wrote their name on the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 78

<sup>39</sup> Bonhoeffer 1954, 78

stretcher if they had areas where they were hurting and on the handle if they were willing to journey with another woman. The Mother's Day gift was community.

Post seminar we strove to include more teaching and modeling of community through leadership and in personal time. Our leadership has been wrestling with ways to help people to get into relationships and to be connected within the community. Several ideas were born out of that and acted upon. The icon that people took home was a jewelry piece that had two hands connected, as a constant reminder that we need to be interconnected. People were also encouraged to develop authentic relationships where they shared their soul, as Bonhoeffer taught.

Over the next year there are areas we hope to focus upon. Historically this has been a strong area for us, but because we are hard on ourselves in this area, we never feel like we are doing enough. We plan to hold an after-church brunch to encourage people to meet each other and also to continue with other connection events we have going on. Another idea we are considering is finding the "widows and orphans" in our congregation and ministering to them as a church, not just a few folks trying to take care of them. Maybe a "Bless the Joneses-It's Your Party" kind of thing where the church-at-large surprises a family that is struggling or hurting,

all on a given day with small gifts, cards, e-mails, and phone calls. Finally we would like to see more people visiting each other's homes.

## **ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR DISCIPLESHIP: SERVICE**

### **Theological Construct of Service**

"Whoever would be great among you must be your servant...even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve.' (Matt 20:25-28)

The essence of a disciple is to serve. To claim that service is not a part of one's Christian responsibility is to claim a position of superiority over Christ. He came to serve. Jesus' spiritual authority is not found in a position or a title, but in a towel. In service we engage with others using who we are and what we have to uphold the good of others, and the cause of Christ in our world.

Service is not a one-way street, however. There *is* personal gain from service. Service trains us away from "arrogance, possessiveness, envy, resentment, or covetousness. In that case, my service is undertaken as a discipline for the spiritual life."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Willard 1991, 183

The essential element of true service is engagement. We cannot truly serve by mindlessly throwing money somewhere or delegating the work to others. Jesus did not *send* help—he came and walked among us. He accomplished the work of service under the same kinds of human circumstances we face. That leaves us without excuses. We are commanded to engage with everyone, even the poor and emotionally needy, serving their inner needs as Christ has done for us.

Henri Nouwen describes our Christian responsibility well:

Christian agents of social change are called upon to be social reformers who do not lose their own souls, to be active and prayerful at the same time. They are called upon to be concerned with the large issues of our time without losing sight of the children, the poor, the sick, and the old, who ask for our personal care and attention.<sup>41</sup>

A question that begs to be asked is, “Won’t people take advantage of the Christian servant?” It is important to understand the difference between choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant. When someone chooses to serve they believe they carry the right to determine whom they will serve and if that person is taking advantage of them. Yet as Foster puts it, “when we choose to be a servant, we give up the right to be in charge. There is a great freedom in this.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Nouwen 1978, 84

<sup>42</sup> Foster 1998, 132

One of the best ways to serve is to do so secretly. "Nothing *disciplines* the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing *transforms* the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness."<sup>43</sup> One of the greatest role models for this is the life of Saint Francis. "For in the Middle Ages Francis was looked upon as the one who most closely imitated Christ. He had grasped the secret of Gospel simplicity; he had followed Christ in complete poverty..."<sup>44</sup>

### **Practical Implementations of Service**

Cornerstone has been particularly active in service this year. The action word we have assigned to this discipline is *engaging*. One of the ways this was modeled was during the seminar itself. While I was sitting in class, Cornerstone hosted more than 60 under-resourced women of the community for a day of pampering. The women of Cornerstone were giving our guests dignity through haircuts, manicures, massages and much more. Meanwhile our men were in the parking lots and changing the oil and washing the cars of women who had them.

After the seminar we strove to include more teaching and modeling of service in our corporate worship time. We had one Sunday where we flew in Esdras Kelly, our pastor friend from the Dominican Republic, who taught about the need for clean water in his village of Santa Rosa. We

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 130

<sup>44</sup> Bonaventure 1978, 14

then had a reverse offering where we handed out \$1500 in \$20 bills. After teaching on the parable of the talents we charged the congregation to invest the money, multiply it, and bring it back in three weeks. So far more than \$8000 has come in, with the promise of more to come. There were only two rules to this charge: the participants had to multiply the money through moral means only, and they could not just give their own money. We told them this was because we wanted them to be relationally engaged in the project and not just blindly throwing in money. We also wanted them to see how God would accomplish these things.

After the seminar we included more teaching and modeling of service for our congregants' personal time. The icon they took home was a small basin and a towel, to remind them of their need to serve. We also gave them a devotional that encouraged them to engage in these acts on their own. On our mission trips to the Dominican Republic, we emphasize that through our acts of service we are relationally engaging with the community. Finally, we hosted our first week-long winter shelter for the homeless this year.

We hope to focus on new areas in the coming year. We will have more events that serve the poor and allow us to relationally engage with them. We will offer more mission trips to the Dominican Republic and more

encouragements to daily serve one another. In short, we will strive not only to live as Jesus modeled, but as Saint Francis taught us as well.

## **ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR DISCIPLESHIP: STEWARDSHIP**

### **Theological Construct of Stewardship**

"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." Matthew 6:24

Stewardship begins with an attitude and a proper understanding. As apprentices of Jesus, we are stewards. A steward is a person who by God's grace belongs to God. Because stewards belong to God they recognize that everything they are and have belongs to God and has been given to them as a gift. Therefore, they seek to both enjoy the gifts God has given them and to invest those gifts in others and in the future by distributing them wisely. The great myth in our western world is that we own anything, that we deserve anything, that we do anything, and that we are sovereign over our own lives. God is the creator of all things, with humankind being the pinnacle of his creation. He created us in his image and therefore given all of us the ability to create as well. Everything good originates with Jesus and everything good we touch or have is by His grace.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” John 1:1-3

God models stewardship himself. God gives constantly and consistently. His generosity culminates in the gift of his only Son, who died a horrific death on the cross in payment for our sin. How can God be so generous? It's a natural outflow of his limitless love: "For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Richard Foster says:

Jesus speaks to the question of economics more than any other single social issue. If, in a comparatively simple society, our Lord lays such strong emphasis upon the spiritual dangers of wealth, how much more should we who live in a highly affluent culture take seriously the economic question.<sup>45</sup>

One of the greatest ways to learn about the discipline of stewardship is to practice the discipline of frugality. By being frugal we can position our minds better to understand what it means to be a steward. Willard teaches it this way:

In frugality we abstain from using money or goods at our disposal in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hunger for status, glamour, or luxury. Practicing frugality means we stay

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<sup>45</sup> Foster 1998, 33

within the bounds of what general good judgment would designate as necessary for the kind of life to which God has led us.<sup>46</sup>

Once we learn to become stewards we make a wonderful discovery. Our need to give is greater than God's need to receive, because he is always well supplied. As an apprentice of Jesus learns to give, the apprentice receives spiritual blessings far beyond the cost.

### **Practical Implementations of Stewardship**

The action word we have assigned to this discipline is *sacrifice*. (I am aware that Dallas Willard defines sacrifice differently) As previously mentioned, Cornerstone Community Church used to have six tools of disciplines, recently having added another. Stewardship is the newest tool. Stewardship used to be buried under service because, of what I now realize, my insecurities when dealing with the issues of money.

Post seminar we strove to include more teaching and modeling of stewardship. In theory we devote ten percent of our services—five or six a year—to the topic of giving. We are not quite there yet. During the teachings we are talking more unashamedly on the topic, realizing that while our motives might be questioned, we know our hearts are pure on the matter. We have had some giving testimonies so people can hear about how God is at work.

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<sup>46</sup> Willard 1991, 168

Over the next year there are areas we hope to focus upon when it comes to stewardship. It is our plan in the fall to host a Christian financial seminar to help people to better learn how to manage their money. In truth, it is an area that the Pastor's Council needs to examine more.

## **ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR DISCIPLESHIP: MULTIPLICATION**

### **Theological Construct of Multiplication**

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Matthew 9: 37-38

For the purpose of clarity, multiplication is being defined here as: the discipline of intentionally creating spiritually mentoring relationships with a pre-Christian or a disciple of Christ for the purpose of assisting the person further along the path of their spiritual journey.

Jesus' last earthly command was to go and make disciples. It is our assignment to walk with and mentor people to assist them in their relationship with Jesus. There is no better way to do that than to let people see Jesus at work in the apprentice's life. Saint Francis of Assisi said it best, "Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words."

Spiritual mentors strive to live like Jesus did and to journey with others in the same way that Jesus walked with His apprentices. This can only be effectively accomplished if the apprentice is actively pursuing a new way of life himself or herself. Then, just as the apprentice has become

reconciled with God, the apprentice can become an instrument of reconciliation, an instrument of peace. A prayer that Saint Francis of Assisi prayed can be of great assistance to the apprentice.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.

Dallas Willard, a proponent of believers living out their faith, not just talking about it, says, "In short, however, you lead people to become disciples of Jesus by ravishing them with a vision of life in the kingdom of the heavens in the fellowship of Jesus."<sup>47</sup> Sharing the Kingdom of God with them through actions, teaching and lifestyle does this. The result can be a change in the belief systems that direct people's lives. Being a spiritual mentor, whether in helping someone see a new way of life in Jesus, or in assisting a fellow apprentice in his or her character transformation, is our spiritual opportunity.

Followers of Christ have been blessed, and entrusted, by Christ to partner with God in advancing the Kingdom. The best way to do this one-on-one is to get to know the other person's story. Figure out what part(s) of God's story the person has already gotten right. Celebrate with that person the part of the story that is correct, then begin sharing more good news about the rest of Jesus' story.

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<sup>47</sup> Willard 1998, 305

### **Practical Implementations of Multiplication**

The action word we have assigned to multiplication is *investing*. We taught our community about the opportunity we have to invest into others and we gave them a box of matches as a take-home icon to remind them of the impact one small flame, if properly directed, can make.

After the seminar we strove to include teaching and modeling of multiplication in our corporate worship time. During one service, before the message time we had our congregants fill out a small survey that asked them to answer specific questions about their neighbors and co-workers. Here they discovered how much, or how little, they knew about the people around them. After teaching about helping people to find their place in God's story we paused the service again. We asked our people to reflect on the survey they had filled out and to reflect upon what God was calling them to do.

We provided more teaching and modeling of multiplication for people's personal use. We encouraged our congregants to spend time building relationships. Perhaps they could share their spiritual portfolios with each other or perhaps engage in conversation with pre-Christians. We encouraged them to pray for and more deeply engage people with whom they already have a relationship. We also gave them a devotional on the

topic that asked them to proclaim the Gospel, and when necessary to use words.

In the coming year we hope to expand on this concept. The service project of raising money for water in the Dominican Republic really struck a chord with the people of Cornerstone Community Church. While we intended the project to be an example of service, it was interesting to see how many other spiritual disciplines people made use of as they completed it. Evangelism was a big one. Our parishioners were being asked why they were raising money and their response would be something like, "Let me tell you a cool thing God is doing through my church." We hope to create more avenues that encourage people to engage with others in the coming year.

## **ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR DISCIPLESHIP: CORPORATE WORSHIP**

### **Theological Construct of Corporate Worship**

I believe that every healthy thing a disciple does is an act of worship. Writing this paper is an act of worship. Therefore, I have defined this section more narrowly as corporate worship. I believe healthy corporate worship overflows into personal worship and vice versa.

The early Christian community had a great sense of being gathered together in worship. While there certainly was personal worship going

on, it was of primary importance to get together as a group. When they did so, a unity of spirit emerged that transcended individualism. Their worship, while certainly flawed as earthly worship always is, appeared to have a sense of purity to it.

Corporate worship is an opportunity for believers to gather together, take the focus off themselves and orient themselves towards God. Richard Foster declares, "Today God is calling his Church back to worship. ... It is as if God is saying, 'I want the hearts of my people back! And if we long to go where God is going and do what God is doing, we will move into deeper, more authentic worship."<sup>48</sup> Corporate worship is a spiritual discipline because "it is an ordered way of acting and living that sets us before God so he can transform us."<sup>49</sup>

Today many Western Christians have an erroneous idea of the purpose of worship. The question of worship is not, "What will meet *my* need?" The real question is, "What does *God* call for?" God calls for wholehearted, authentic worship. Worship can and should include disciplines such as praise, confession, celebration, community, making God the object of worship and proclaiming the word of God.

Western church worship needs to move back to being more experiential, allowing people to engage with God. If a person experiences the feeling

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<sup>48</sup> Foster 1998, 163

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 166

of being detached or self absorbed during a corporate worship experience, they have missed the point of worship.

Silence can be another beautiful part of worship. Henry Nouwen shares about both the beauty and the danger of incorporating silence into corporate worship:

“Imposed silence often creates hostility and resentment. Many ministers who have experimented with silence in their service have soon found out that silence can be more demonic than divine and have quickly picked up the signals that were saying: ‘Please keep talking.’ It is quite understandable that most forms of ministry avoid silence precisely so as to ward off the anxiety it provokes...

[Nouwen then makes an argument for silence in worship]

...Calling people together, therefore, means calling them away from the fragmenting and distracting wordiness of the dark world to that silence in which they can discover themselves, each other, and God.”<sup>50</sup>

Corporate worship is a discipline where apprentices of Christ gather together in unity and encounter God. It is a beautiful way of modeling the kind of worship that can and should go on in their private lives.

Furthermore, corporate worship is a wonderful time to model many of the spiritual disciplines, which teach them how to move more to the character of Christ. Corporate worship is also an excellent time for pre-Christians to get a picture of what it means to pursue this new way of life.

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<sup>50</sup> Nouwen 1981, 52

## **Practical Implementations of Corporate Worship**

The action word we have assigned to corporate worship is *expression*. It is our opportunity to express our praise, our celebration and our commitment towards alignment with Christ.

After the Spirituality and Ministry seminar, we began making some significant changes in our corporate worship time. One of the most significant was incorporating more engagement into the services. After experimenting with this for a while, we decided to build more of these practices into our worship services. Each Sunday we determine not only how we can learn about, sing about and even watch multi-media expressions of the topic at hand, but also how people can actually start interacting with it right in worship and not have to wait until they go home. Another significant practice has been having periods of silence built into the worship service.

While we have broken out of our shell in many ways, there is still much work to do, as revealed in a response from a recent evaluation on worship at Cornerstone Community Church:

"I think that Cornerstone, like most evangelical churches, struggles with the breadth and depth of expression. We're so stuck with singing a few songs together and having that suffice for our corporate expression. It could be so much richer. More responsive readings, more people involved in leading segments of the service, more stories of faith and most of all more direction from the 'worship leaders' to go deeper in our expression- break some of our inhibitions down."

This is indeed a challenge, and we will be exploring it more in the coming year.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Henry Nouwen says it best:

We are only a very small part of history and have only one short life to live, but when we take the fruits of our labor in our hands and stretch our arms to God in the deep belief that God hears us and accepts our gifts, then we know that all of our life is given, and given to celebrate.<sup>51</sup>

Spiritual disciplines are habits we develop that enable us to take on the character of Christ. They are tools that help aid us to live like Christ. Spiritual disciplines are activities that we do to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort alone. The result is a well-directed life that allows for spiritual and ministerial growth.

Cornerstone Community Church is on a journey towards taking on the character of Christ. With these tools we should be better equipped spur each other on in that proper direction.

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<sup>51</sup> Nouwen 1978, 122

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