

A STRATEGY FOR EMPLOYING INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH
AT GURNEE COMMUNITY CHURCH

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To Lynn, Peter, and Gregory
And in memory of my parents
George and Ruth Merkel

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INTRODUCTION

I own a bike, but I almost never ride it. When I do ride it the tires are always flat from lack of use. I still remember learning to ride a bike. My first bike was a shiny gold “sting ray”-style bike with a big banana seat and high back “sissy bar.” It was a sunny Saturday morning when my dad and I went to pick up the bike from the local bike shop. When we got home I had a thrilling task ahead of me: learning to ride! My best friend, Chucky, already had a bike and he knew how to ride. I remember he was there riding alongside me down the center of the street as my older brother, already in high school at the time, was running behind me helping me to learn. There were no training wheels on this bike and I was being forced to learn to ride cold turkey. I don’t think the subject of training wheels ever was an option in our family. I was going to learn the hard way, the traditional way, the true American way how to ride a bike. It might sound surprising, but as I remember it, after a few short runs down the street, with Chucky cheering me on as he rode alongside, I was off and riding.

That bike became the symbol of my childhood life. I rode all the time with my friends. We learned to pop wheelies and to do jumps, and to do the ever popular “ride-with-no-hands!” Riding my bike was my life. By junior high I had outgrown the sting-ray bike, so I got a hunter green Schwinn ten-speed and my biking world exploded. Not only did I continue to ride often, but now I could really ride distances. I rode the Schwinn every day to school on the other side of town, and as far as the next town over to get my hair cut at our favorite barbershop. My bike was my life, but today I own a bike and almost never ride it.

When I became a committed Christian, it was something I really wanted to do. I had grown up in the church, but making a personal commitment to faith was poorly presented. I remember attending Confirmation meetings at the Reverend Dr. Benton Gaskel's house and that I enjoyed the cookies. If we talked about having a relationship with God, it is far from my memory; but I do remember Mrs. Gaskel's cookies! A few years later my church friends were talking about going to the Friday night concerts at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. After my first visit I could not wait to go a second time because I knew I wanted to affirm my faith publicly, as I had witnessed others do. Three weeks later, with my friends alongside me, I gave my life to Christ and my faith in God became the symbol of my life. I still ride this "bike" with an ever increasing passion. I have discovered that beyond the thrill of becoming a child of God by confession of faith is the drive to become more fully one of Jesus' disciples.

Dallas Willard writes that the Western Church in the last several decades has "not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian," and in fact, "one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship."¹ Willard contends that Christians today have made discipleship "optional" by not stressing the value and necessity of the spiritually disciplined life. Gurnee Community Church (hereafter GCC) is filled with people quite pleased with their relationship with Christ. If living the spiritual life could be equated to riding a bike, then all members of GCC can ride a bike and some even take it out once or twice a week for a short spin. However, only for a very few does the relationship with Christ symbolize their life's passion.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Rediscovering Jesus' Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 4.

GCC is a church fulfilling, to a greater or lesser extent, God's mission and purpose for the Church by making and nurturing followers of Christ. The question remains, however, whether the church can be a community bent on raising more followers who desire to make following Christ their life passion. Clyde Reid wrote in 1966 that the church for all its good intentions has been structured around "evading God."² Dallas Willard confirms this, and writes that Reid's "law of religious evasion" suggests that "we structure our churches and maintain them so as to shield us from God and to protect us from genuine religious experience."³ The well-intentioned efforts tend to fail in the end to push the common believer toward the venture of their personal quest for God. This study will endeavor to find avenues through spiritual disciplines to break the church out of these evasion enabling practices.

In other words, this ministry focus paper will consider whether this church can move people from satisfaction with spiritual activity toward a deeper understanding and experience of God. Robert Webber suggests that the focus of the spiritual life is two-fold. First, he says that believers "contemplate the reality of God incarnate" and they do this through "our personal devotion and in our communal life in the church in worship, in Scripture, in Eucharist, and in prayer."⁴ These are the pathways to a delight in God that bring peace in the soul and satisfaction with one's life and one's life in the world. But Webber says that there is a second focus of the spiritual life which is to "participate in the

² Clyde H. Reid, *The God-Evaders*, 1st ed. (New York.: Harper & Row, 1966), 41, quoted in Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 201.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 43.

purposes of God in history.”⁵ When followers of Christ transition to a personal recognition of their participation in the purposes of God, they have become so engaged in the spiritual life that they are better characterized as having become disciples. They have moved from the thrill of being in the body of Christ, through the satisfaction and marvel of being on a faith journey, to a fundamental realization that they play a purposeful role in the plans of God.

The Apostle Paul faced this issue as a dilemma and it may be the reason he wrote ahead to the church in Rome, to prepare them for becoming people more accustomed to being disciples of Christ. To the Roman church he wrote: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).⁶ These oft-quoted words demonstrate that Paul desired to point the followers of Christ toward a deeper understanding and experience of God. Greater spiritual devotion to God and a clearer recognition of his will leads to a fuller expression of discipleship in the life of the person of faith. It is the focus of this project that at the heart of the discipleship way of life are the disciplines of the spirit that open the man and woman of God to the ways and wisdom of the creator and sustainer of life. It is these disciplines that draw the follower of Christ to the realm of spiritual oneness with God and gives the follower of God the power and wisdom to know his will and to “participate” in the purposes of God as revealed through Christ and inspired today through the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁶ All biblical references will be given in the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

The struggle to help balance one's life of faith with the activity of daily life has been an effort not uncommon to the local church. GCC has a long history of spiritual life in its community. Many emerging disciples have walked through the life of this community and church on their journey to deeper expressions of faith and to a greater recognition of the purposes of God for their lives. Lloyd John Oglivie is the most prominent name among this fellowship's success stories. Today, the typical church attendee at GCC is satisfied to assume that the declaration, "I gave my life to Christ," affords them all they need for salvation. The notion and hope of Christ that everyone can have a deeper understanding and experience of God and that they can share in the purposes of God remains for most an unfamiliar or distant revelation.

Through the moving of the Spirit and a few key role models, the present generation of spiritual leaders at GCC has emerged as capable spiritual directors who have poised this church for a venture into discipleship through the pathway of spiritual disciplines. This team of leaders can be instrumental in helping more members of GCC bridge the gap between satisfaction with the contemplative delight of God to possessing more passionate energy to help mentor others toward a deeper understanding and experience of God and to the realization of how they can fulfill the purposes of God for the church community. This study will reveal that the bridge between following Christ and purposeful discipleship has its foundation in the spiritually disciplined life. Therefore, the purpose of this ministry focus paper is to present a strategy for helping the collective body of GCC to have a growing faith in Jesus Christ through personal and corporate integration of spiritual disciplines.

This ministry focus paper will present a guide for the congregants of GCC. It will lay out a formula for introducing the general population of the church to a model of spiritual disciplines that will promote a deeper understanding and experience of God. It will direct the church to prepare pathways that lead to greater discipline. It will guide the church to raise the value of discipleship through spiritual discipline to the highest priority in the lives of those who come to follow him at GCC. This is the faith journey the community is poised to take and it is the pathway they must take towards fulfilling the most challenging focus of the church's mission statement: to "journey towards full devotion to God."

This ministry focus paper will contain three major sections. Part One will explore the context of GCC. It will serve as an overview of the church, its history in the community, and its present situation. The first chapter will describe the church's people, their diverse spiritual background, and the unique spiritual foundation of the present church community. The next chapter will examine the impact of the church-wide "faith journey" movement that began approximately ten years ago. That movement raised a desire for the church to identify a "roadmap" for spiritual maturity. The chapter will also explore potential and realized obstacles or roadblocks that have or appear to have stalled spiritual growth despite a grand and inspired mission.

Part Two will then explore the basic understanding of, and the nature of, individual spiritual growth and maturity. The first of two chapters here will outline a theology of spiritual formation through unintentional and intentional spiritual discipline, and show evidence that most spiritual growth happens through the habits of spiritual activity. The chapter will conclude by demonstrating how every individual participating

in a personally unique variety of spiritual discipline will effectively lead to greater discipleship through life-changing experiences of God. The second chapter will then identify the various spiritual disciplines and organize them into primary and secondary spiritual disciplines for practical purposes. The chapter will also identify biblical expressions of spiritual discipline that are witnesses to direct experiences of God within the community of faith in both the Old and New Testaments and the developing church.

Part Three will provide a practical strategy for guiding the Christians of GCC to discipleship through intentional spiritual discipline. The first chapter of this section will concentrate on the focused atmosphere necessary to raise the importance of spiritual disciplines. It will focus on developing pathways for individuals and groups to directly experience God through the activities of spiritual disciplines. The final chapter will focus on an emerging philosophy of church ministry at GCC. Included in this will be the rethinking of leadership structures, traditional ministry models, and building facility needs in order to foster spiritual formation through spiritual disciplines. This chapter will also offer an implementation timeline in order to avoid short-term trends and conclude with a long-range vision where spiritual discipline activity is a way of life, discipleship is an emerging value, and experiencing God is the distinguishing character of the church.

My desire in writing this paper is two-fold. First, it is my sincere hope that those in leadership at GCC will continue to witness the transformation going on at GCC through the power of the Holy Spirit; that they will see the church as a community of followers of Christ poised for spiritual awakening; and that they will envision the impact the raising of disciples through spiritual disciplines will have on the church's fulfillment of its mission and its vision to reach everyone in its community for Christ. It is my

second hope that this effort will have such an impact that followers of Christ at GCC, new followers in the church, and even some in the greater Church beyond our doors and community would be drawn into the fullness of God through personal participation in spiritual disciplines. I pray that those who follow this “faith journey” to be his disciples through spiritual disciplines will fulfill the hope of Christ that they would delight in experiencing God and be thrilled with participating in the purposes of God.

CHAPTER 3

SPIRITUAL FORMATION THROUGH SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Spiritual Fingerprints: Everyone's Faith Journey Travels a Unique Road

One of the common characteristic of today's consumerism culture is the notion that everything can be captured, boxed, and sold in mass quantities. People can have whatever ever they want in its complete expression, and their neighbors can have the same too. Packaging spiritual growth into a neatly organized plan is nearly impossible because Christian spirituality is a unique expression in each individual and requires personal efforts unique to that individual. Because modernity has driven the world to believe that everything can be packaged or organized succinctly, many people find it difficult to venture too far on the spiritual journey which is much harder to distinctly package because of people's diverse character and backgrounds. The pathway to God is not a scientific journey; it is a spiritual journey on a road less obvious and one particularly unique to the individual, like a fingerprint.

Where a scientific journey has a clear and obvious goal, the spiritual journey is much more mysterious, a venture into the unknown. There is on the spiritual journey always the sense that where believers are at any given time on the journey of faith is not completely where God wants them to be and that where they are going is not fully obvious or revealed. The journey is always advancing as people continually search for God's purposes in their lives. This mystery makes each person's journey very unique. However, while the journey is unique, the destination the Christ-follower desires from his or her journey is the deeper understanding and fuller experience or revelation of God and the quest for clarity to participate in the purposes of God. Consequently, no two journeys

are alike, just as no two fingerprints are alike, and this is often difficult in the minds of those in the present culture who have the embedded expectation of a packaged plan. Hagberg and Guelich, who suggest there are some common stages along the journey, agree that the fingerprint of the journey of faith is unique. They comment that the journey is “not to be duplicated, because of the particular people and events along the way.”⁷ All too often the Church fails to recognize this and has difficulty launching people towards the exploration of their personal and unique journeys.

Allen has observed this and may know why it is difficult; he suggests that all the great philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and others agreed that “life was a movement away from illusion, error, or sin toward enlightenment, truth and renewal.”⁸ Thus he says Christian spirituality should not be a “personal hobby” but rather entered into as a “human enterprise.”⁹ Allen says emphatically that failure to recognize the journey in life this way is to “fail to be human” and will result in “great deprivation.”¹⁰ The faith journey is always mysterious as no one knows fully what the journey is going to reveal and where it is going to end up. The uniqueness of everyone’s journey makes it very difficult to compare one person’s journey to the next.

The uniqueness of the faith journey in the follower of Christ makes this project very difficult. Charting a course and plotting a pathway to travel is not easy. Believers at GCC are looking for a guide and a group of people to join with on that journey. They desire a packaged plan, a new program, a resource they can buy into in order to

⁷ Hagberg and Guelich. *The Critical Journey*, xix.

⁸ Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 22.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22-23.

experience God more fully. But these packages are few and far between and they are only sufficient to a certain point because in the end, each person must be responsible for traveling his or her own journey to God, down his or her own unique road. Clyde Reid, as noted in the Introduction, refers to the inability of the Church to help push people on to their own journeys as enabling the “evading” of God.¹¹ Reid suggested that too often “we structure our churches and maintain them so as to shield us from God and to protect us from genuine religious experience.”¹² All too often the well-intentioned efforts fail to push the desiring follower of Christ out of the nest to venture on their personal quests for God. Often, this is due to the fact that most in the Church are stuck on their journeys for lack of real role models to direct them. What is more, even if the leadership of the Church knew they were to help others, they would have no idea what direction to point people in, nor would they know exactly what they are sending them out to discover about themselves and God. This chapter will provide greater clarity regarding giving this direction and some benchmarks of spiritual maturity will be revealed to help the traveler on the spiritual journey.

Spiritual Formation, Maturity and Experiencing God Understood

Fortunately, just as all fingerprints may be different, they also look very similar and thus it is important to this ministry focus paper to better understand the similarities in the journey to start. While Hagberg and Guelich recognize the uniqueness of a person’s faith journey, they also suggest that “all journeys of faith are similar because we are

¹¹ Reid, *The God-Evaders*, 41, quoted in Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 201.

¹² Ibid.

people who do fairly predictable things.”¹³ So in fact the early stages of the journey are similar because the Church orders and structures one’s initial spiritual life. The Church becomes, for many, that narrow gate each person traditionally must venture through to find God. Yet, as noted earlier, the Church, if it is not careful, can also become a roadblock to one progressing along the journey. Understanding that caution, it is crucial that the Church better appreciate and understand the predictable and most common stages of faith so as not to become an obstacle to anyone’s spiritual growth.

Hagberg and Guelich have suggested that the fingerprint of the spiritual journey is characterized by six stages that occur on the journey of faith. These stages include: “1) the recognition of God, 2) the life of discipleship, 3) the productive life, 4) the journey inward, 5) the journey outward, and 6) the life of love.”¹⁴ Hagberg and Guelich believe that these stages or similar expressions of these stages are evident in the thoughts and writings of many Christian theologians and influential spiritual role models through the ages. They include in their list: Augustine; Julian of Norwich; Francis of Assisi; Ignatius of Loyola; Soren Kierkegaard; and most recently, Scott Peck.¹⁵ For instance, Julian of Norwich, inspired by passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:18, reflects in her writing on the processes of her own revelation of God. In one way she discusses her pilgrimage through five images of the bleeding of Jesus in the Passion, and in a second way through three stages of exposure to God: 1) beginning, 2) inward understanding, and 3) revelation.¹⁶ Also, Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola's most famous theological composition, the

¹³ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, xix.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁶ Edmund Colledge Julian and James Walsh, *Showings*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 218, 269.

Spiritual Exercises, is a well-ordered manual of meditations, rules, and practices culled from his own experiences. Ignatius of Loyola considered this a guide for the Christian's journey from purgation to enlightenment to union with Christ. It has been suggested that the *Spiritual Exercises* were ideal for the "person who sincerely desires to discover how he or she can please and serve God best."¹⁷ A recent study done by the Willow Creek Association is affirming this again for today's generation; they identify four primary stages which include: 1) exploring Christ, 2) growing in Christ, 3) close to Christ, and then 4) Christ centered.¹⁸ The Willow Creek Association agrees also that spiritual practices are important at all the stages although they suggest that "they become most important for those who are more spiritually mature."¹⁹

In essence, this journey through the stages of faith best describes the word "spirituality." Spirituality is that process by which one draws closer to God. It was noted previously that spirituality, according to Hagberg and Guelich, is "the way in which we live out our response to God."²⁰ Allen adds to this notion that spirituality is in particular a "focus on the Holy Spirit who brings to fullness in our lives and in the Christian community the work of God achieved in Christ."²¹ What all this means is that spirituality is an intersecting of one's efforts to experience and respond to God along with God's effort, through the Holy Spirit, to reveal himself and his particular purposes to the

¹⁷ Ignatius and George E. Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 51.

¹⁸ Hawkins, Greg L. and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 43.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 3.

²¹ Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 18-19.

follower of Christ. This makes spirituality dynamic because it is two dimensional, a shared process involving the individual's efforts to open his or her heart to receiving God and the Holy Spirit's ability to interpret God in a way that God can fill the heart that is opening wider to receive him. Webber puts it more simply by saying Christian spirituality is "God's passionate embrace of us," and "our passionate embrace of God."²²

Spiritual formation is similar in every Christ-follower in the transformational effect that takes place as a result of personal effort and the activity of the Holy Spirit. All along the journey there is dynamic interaction between what efforts the individual is making and what efforts of the Holy Spirit are being received into the heart of the individual. Spiritual formation is a shared work between the individual and God as they formulate their relationship. Webber says this is like "two sides of a single coin" because on one hand, "*God makes us spiritual,*" and on the other, "*we live the spiritual life.*"²³ Along this journey, there is assistance from various sources, the most obvious being the Church and its affirming community of followers and disciples. Others that assist in this journey are immediate family, peers, and spiritual guides that come in various forms including books, counselors, mentors and even institutions. These tools help the individual, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to formulate a dynamic relationship with God. All this then helps the Christ-follower manage the experiences of life from a perspective of being a spiritual person.

Spiritual formation is also a maturing process as the person of faith travels the journey through the stages of spirituality. Hagberg and Guelich suggest there are stages

²² Robert Webber, *The Divine Embrace: Recovering the Passionate Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 16.

²³ Ibid.

characterized by maturing processes including “recognition” of God, “learning” from others, and “belonging” to the community.²⁴ But if spiritual formation is a maturing process, is there a point in which one can declare himself or herself spiritually mature? Maturity is characterized by ripeness, a state of wisdom or even an advanced level of experience. For the Christian community to identify any one person as spiritually mature, what criterion might be considered? Four general themes best summarize the benchmarks of spiritual maturity. These benchmarks are the characteristics and state of awareness common to those who have become fully developed in their faith and share a deeper understanding of God.

The first benchmark is: Christ’s life is the perfect model for all. For those advancing in faith and spiritual awareness, a benchmark occurs when it becomes apparent to the Christian that Christ is not only one’s savior but also the perfect model of how to live one’s life. A person reaches a level of maturity when modeling the life of Christ becomes the person’s all-encompassing endeavor. Hagberg and Guelich suggest that at this stage “Christ’s life represents not just an example but a model for our lives.”²⁵ This means one is willing to replicate Christ’s life, or as Hagberg and Guelich suggest, “We willingly are obedient to God’s call, even, if necessary, unto death.”²⁶ The Apostle Paul recognizes this value in Philippians 2:5 when he emphatically suggests, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” Paul emphasizes that one’s mind and heart must be focused on practicing life as Jesus did, sharing in Christ’s behavior. Jac Muller points out in his exegesis that Paul’s point is to drive home the necessity to “contemplate

²⁴ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 33, 53.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

this in yourselves,”²⁷ that is, to contemplate how to fashion one’s own character to be the same as that of Christ. George Arthur Buttrick, in his commentary titled *The Interpreter’s Bible*, suggests that this is a pinnacle of Paul’s writings because Paul lays out the “first definition of the test for a Christian” which is “a disposition of mind.” Buttrick points out that this disposition of mind is more important as a test of spiritual identity in Christ than “creeds, sacraments, rites, or correct morals.”²⁸ The first benchmark of spiritual maturity, therefore, is an attitude changing to be more like that of Christ.

The second benchmark is love, compassion and laying down one’s life. Building on this emphasis of a passionate desire to model Christ’s character is a fuller expression of what it means to love. Jesus’ love for humanity was perfect (1 John 4:17-19). Through Christ’s ministry, unconditional love became the symbol of the Christian life. The spiritually mature believer is characterized by simply living love by being filled with compassion and concern for others. Hagberg and Guelich point out that when one is “in constant dialogue with God, our lives are permeated with unconditional love.”²⁹ Henri Nouwen also emphasizes this love and compassion as the tallest virtue of ministry, a value not reserved for the clergy but for everyone of faith. Nouwen says the fullest expression of love and of Christian ministry is “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”³⁰ This is the loving expression the savior gave his people when he died on the

²⁷ Jac J. Müller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 77.

²⁸ George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), Volume XI, 48.

²⁹ Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 153.

³⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 114.

cross, and it is the most loving action believers can give when they are driven to sacrifice their interests in order to give new life to another.

This powerful love is reflected in Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians in Philippians 2:5-8. Paul writes:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

In his explanation of what it means to share in the attitude of Christ, Paul emphasizes the servant nature of Christ and his grand humility. These were evidence of Christ’s ability to put others before himself. This behavior of Christ is the best expression of love. Paul points out that Christ willingly died on the cross for the sake of every human being. Christ was overwhelmed by love for God’s people and so the person who shares this value has realized an important benchmark to spirituality. In fact, this benchmark of love is nowhere better explained by Paul than in Philippians 2. Gordon Fee notes that in this passage the truth about God is revealed “that God is love and that his love expresses itself in self-sacrifice for the sake of those he loves.”³¹ Spiritual maturity is marked by a movement towards this self-sacrificing love and this is another important benchmark.

Another clear manifestation of spiritual maturity is recognition of the Holy Spirit’s presence, and this is the third benchmark. This may be the clearest expression of what it means to experience God. The Holy Spirit allows one to see God working in the world and in one’s life. Hagberg and Guelich suggest that when one is filled with the Spirit, “So pervasive is the presence of the Spirit in our lives that we may not even be

³¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series; 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 97.

particularly conscious of doing something of the Spirit.”³² The Spirit’s presence becomes synonymous with an individual’s instinctive character. Believers have a clearer understanding of their spiritual gifts that are given them to glorify God. Furthermore, the fruits of the Spirit are ripening all over their lives and in their interactions with those around them.

Throughout Paul’s letters there is emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s presence in spiritual maturity. There is emphasis on the necessity of “fellowship with the Spirit” in Paul’s definitive summary in Philippians 2:1. He declares boldly that if there is “fellowship with the spirit” there is shared character with Christ and the spirit governs and motivates one’s particular actions of spiritual character. The “fellowship with the spirit” is an indication of the level of trust embraced by the follower and an indication that the person of faith has received the “power bestowed by Christ.”³³ This brings to clarity what Paul writes in Romans 8:9, “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.” The life of the spiritually mature is empowered by the Holy Spirit that has taken up residence in one’s soul because of the increased trust in God. Thus this third benchmark of spiritual maturity is an expression of the embracing relationship that occurs between the emerging disciple and God who is manifested in the Holy Spirit.

The fourth and final benchmark of spiritual maturity is selfless living and living for eternity. This benchmark might be best illustrated by the life of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. When one gets to this point, one’s personal needs, wants, and passions move from the back seat to literally being discarded along the road. These believers

³² Hagberg and Guelich, *The Critical Journey*, 153.

³³ Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XI, 43.

deliberately give up their lives materially, physically, mentally, and emotionally for service to others and they have no sense of loss in letting it all go. Allen calls this reaching “*apatheia*” which he best describes as being able to model Christ’s love and live by the spirit without any “undue distraction.”³⁴ In essence, the follower of Christ has freely abandoned any reward this life might bring to focus solely on the life of eternity that lies ahead. This is what Paul means when he says early to the Philippians, “for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). This is ultimately the new life one seeks in their rebirth of faith; it is the culmination of the search for true meaning. Gordon Fee explains that this is more than imitating God; it is actually having “the mind of Christ, developed in us, so that we too can bear God’s image in our attitudes and relationships within the Christian community – and beyond.”³⁵ Spiritual maturity is ultimately benchmarked by one’s fully embracing Christ as Lord and this is most evident when followers eagerly go to their knees and confess Christ as Lord of their lives and the world. For such people there is a passionate embrace of God and an eagerness to share eternity with him. Bowing the knee according to Fee is “a common idiom for doing homage, sometimes in prayer, but always in recognition of the authority of the god or person before whom one is kneeling.”³⁶ Similarly, the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord is an acknowledgment that Jesus is “supreme.”³⁷ Spiritually mature people reach this benchmark when they join with the society of saints, both in heaven and on earth,

³⁴ Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 80.

³⁵ Fee, *Philippians*, 102.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁷ Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XI, 51.

who truly confess the supremacy of Christ over all things and over all other gods, and that there is none like him.³⁸

These four benchmarks summarize the attitudes and values that increasingly become pervasive in the maturing Christian. While the character of a mature Christian is similar, it remains true that all who walk the journey arrive through a unique pathway with the help of the Holy Spirit. Therefore these transformational benchmarks of spiritual maturity are the values toward which the Church can point individuals as they grow and mature in faith. What is more, as this ministry focus paper will demonstrate, it is spiritual disciplines of various sorts that best help followers of Christ position themselves to make the journey towards spiritual maturity and the greater experience of God. In the next section the process of moving towards spiritual maturity will be more clearly drafted. Emphasis will be given on how spiritual disciplines, practices, and rituals of family and church influence people along their spiritual journeys.

Spiritual Growth Happens through Spiritual Disciplines

Rick Warren, in his popular book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, points out that “everyone is driven by something.”³⁹ No matter who one has become or what stage in life one is in, everyone is driven by something. Everybody is being guided, controlled, or

³⁸ Buttrick’s reference says: “The enduring supremacy of Christ’s revelation will not depend on the support of theologians or the vote of the churches. It will rest on the simple fact that to the end of time no one can show us any power other than the love that stooped to earth in him, which can win over our human spirits from enslavement to self. This power unto salvation contradicted all the expectations of authorities, religious and secular, in Jesus’ own day. And it will forever contradict every way of imposing on the human will from outside which tries to supplant this inside persuasion and constraint. Nothing else can save man from himself and at the same time leave him his freedom.” Buttrick, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume XI, 51-52.

³⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 27.

directed in a certain direction from the first moment of birth. Children are driven by their parents who set them on the best possible growth plan and eventually the children mature enough to take the reins of their own growth and development. Similarly, spiritual life takes on this same pattern. From the time individuals begin to recognize their religious culture, they explore spirituality by the very nature of the spiritual experiences offered to them by their parents. Parents may bring their children to church, put them in Sunday school, invite them to pray before their meals, or read Bible stories to them while they drift off to sleep each night. Spiritual formation begins for most in this environment where people are exposed to the spirituality of their families. At this early stage and for most of their young lives the most influential people in children's spiritual lives are the parents. Ben Freudenburg agrees that "parents are the primary Christian Educators in the church and the family is the God-ordained institution for faith building in children and youth and for the passing of faith from one generation to the next."⁴⁰ The familiarity with spiritual practices and disciplines starts very early, and it starts in the home and rarely in the church.

Similarly the exposure to spirituality in the family is the beginning of participation in spiritual disciplines. A beginning experience, for example, includes the rituals of prayer, attendance at church, and so on where one begins to formulate, at its simplest level, spiritual discipline or spiritual exercise that affects personal spiritual formation. Through these activities, the children or young people are offered and invited to make for themselves a "spiritual life" which Willard refers to as any range of activity

⁴⁰ Ben F. Freudenburg and Rick Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church* (Loveland, CO: Vital Ministry, 1998), 21.

in which people “cooperatively interact with God.”⁴¹ In this regard, any activity of greater or lesser degree which allows the person to cooperatively interact with God becomes a simple spiritual discipline when it is repeatedly participated in either willingly or as routine of one’s family life. Donald Whitney points out additionally that this activity is spiritual discipline in so far as that personal or corporate spiritual activity to some degree is able to “promote spiritual growth.”⁴² His point is that some practices or spiritual activities that lose their ability to promote spiritual growth eventually are no longer formative disciplines but rather meaningless activities. So it is important to recognize that spiritual discipline, at its simplest level, is any spiritual activity that drives the spiritual formation of individuals forward in their faith journeys.

Unintentional Maturity

As we explore how spiritual disciplines expose people to a deeper understanding and experience of God, it is important then to recognize that there are some spiritual disciplines that unintentionally impact personal spiritual growth. This spiritual maturity comes about by virtue of one’s participation in spiritual experiences that are less intentional and more common to a way of life. During young childhood, as noted above, spirituality is out of the individual’s control. Spirituality begins to emerge early in childhood as each child is born into a unique family where a particular culture is lived out and conversely influences spiritual development. All families have a spiritual life background and all cultures are influenced by a spiritual element. In the primarily Judeo-

⁴¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 67.

⁴² Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 17.

Christian culture in America, there are elements of spirituality that are deeply rooted. While these spiritual roots are constantly being challenged by the changing culture, the roots go very deep. Nearly every family has a heritage that is generally framed by some religious affiliation. Even those who grow up in a non-religion-practicing household in America are to some degree influenced by these Judeo-Christian values. Therefore, the religious background into which children are born significantly impacts their spiritual formation in childhood and in many cases into adulthood. Some basic spiritual disciplines are likely to be implanted in a child's character because of these influences.

For the most part, these basic spiritual practices are unintentional influences; they are practiced and participated in as a family, culture, and church. Robert Fulghum has organized an exploration into the rituals of American culture and the value these rituals play in life and in spiritual formation. He suggests that life's rituals of birth, baptism, marriage, parenthood, death and the funeral are participated in as experiences and practices that influence one's spiritual formation. He says "nobody lives without rituals" and "rituals create sacred time," time to dwell in the "eternal," and they "soften the phases of life when we are reminded how hard it is to be human."⁴³ The strength of his text is in his awareness of how powerful and influential rituals are to the formation of the spiritual life. Participation in these rituals is remembered with such vivid clarity that they carry significance in one's formation as a human and a person of God. All the various rituals, and particularly those that are tied to sacred traditions in the Church, are at the foundation of spiritual formation. All the religious rituals of family life and one's particular culture are unintentional practices of spirituality. In an exploration of the

⁴³ Robert Fulghum, *From Beginning to End: The Rituals of Our Lives*, 1st ed. (New York: Villard Books, 1995), 20, 113.

spiritual disciplines, it is necessary to include in the study an acknowledgement of these valued cultural practices and to recognize the value they play in spiritual development and the significance they have in the heart's preparation for personal and intentional spiritual discipline.

Furthermore, looking more closely at the influence of one's church background, it is again important to point out that ritual or routine participation in church, at whatever age, is an unintentional participation in spiritual discipline. Attending worship routinely is a practiced spiritual discipline. Participation in a study group or a small group is a spiritual discipline. Volunteering oneself to serve in the church or in some form of Christian outreach of service is a practice of spiritual discipline. Regularly giving time to personal or corporate prayer is a spiritual discipline. We call these spiritual activities unintentional in that they are often participated in by virtue of one's family and cultural values referenced above, and by virtue of one's choice to associate with a particular religious community, in this case the church. They are unintentional in that the practice is so common to the Christian community that they are experienced less as an exercise of spiritual growth and more as a responsibility or expectation of one's participation. For many in the church, participation in these rituals happens without there ever being much consideration as to why one is driven to do it. Many only practice these simple disciplines because they know they should, from watching others and modeling their family traditions. No doubt there is spiritual growth and spiritual formation in these practices how ever simple it may be.

For the most part, these primary practices of the church were the foundation of the spiritual disciplines identified in the *My Faith Journey* guidebook, a booklet written by

and for GCC that formulates a “Faith Journey Roadmap” for the congregation. In 2004, when the booklet was written, the church identified seven practices common to participation at GCC and labeled them as “spiritual disciplines.” These seven disciplines include worship, prayer, Bible study, community, service, evangelism, and generosity (or stewardship).⁴⁴ While GCC made a point to categorize these practices as spiritual disciplines, they may be misconstrued as such. As outlined in the guidebook they are described as the simple activities that are most common to church life. Depending on how one understands these seven activities they may or may not be understood fully as spiritual disciplines in the truest sense of the meaning. Participating in these activities may give rise to spiritual formation but they may better be understood as the common practices in most Christian churches today. Some might wish to conclude that these are the spiritual disciplines most necessary for spiritual formation and many in the church might be satisfied with this designation. However, most do not practice them as intentional spiritual disciplines but rather participate in these activities out of cultural tradition and ritual. For the purposes of this ministry focus paper, they will be considered basic spiritual practices of the Christian life or activities common to Christian culture.

Intentional Maturity

Turning the tables now, intentional maturity occurs when the spiritual discipline or activity that the individual participates in is sought after intentionally for the purpose of putting one in a place to experience spiritual growth. This level of spiritual discipline is characterized by a personal drive to point one’s heart towards a deeper understanding

⁴⁴ Stuart R. Merkel, ed., *My Faith Journey: A Guide to Growing Closer to Christ*, booklet, printed by Gurnee Community Church in Gurnee, Illinois, 2004, 6.

and experience of God. Willard points out that “the spiritual life is a life of interaction with a personal God, and it is pure delusion to suppose that it can be carried on sloppily.” Going on, he points out that “the will to do his will can only be carried into reality as we *take measures* to be ready and able to meet and draw upon him in our actions.”⁴⁵

Willard, Reid and the latest Willow Creek research, all mentioned above, suggest that for far too long the Church has promoted sloppy and often ineffective efforts to experience God. Intentional spiritual maturity is a value with which the Church should be re-acquainted. Jesus explained to his disciples that they should “take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matthew 11:29). The yoke is heavy and it is binding. It is used to keep the working animal focused and controlled. But Jesus’ yoke is light because he carries most of the burden. The hope for believers (according to Jesus) is in their ability to learn from Jesus, and, like a yoke, this learning effort is focused and intentional. According to Buttrick, this common rabbinical image to accept the yoke “is to put off the yoke of earthly monarchies and worldly care.”⁴⁶ The imploring of Christ to “take” the yoke suggests that the bondage of Christ’s yoke is a “beneficent bondage” focused on reverence to God.⁴⁷ Maturity and growth come when one intentionally puts on a yoke which guides his or her direction. This, in essence, is the function of spiritual disciplines, and may very well be the yoke to which Jesus refers.

Intentional maturity happens, as Willard states in the quote above, when the followers of Christ “take matters” into their own hands to venture towards discovering God on their own effort. In most cases, this effort is hard to do corporately, due to

⁴⁵ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 153.

⁴⁶ Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VII, 390.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

people's particular spiritual "fingerprints." However, because the spiritual journey is similar at times, there are appropriate times to make this a corporate venture, but doing it with two or three is much easier than with ten to twelve or more. Regardless, even if done corporately, the venture of the soul's inward journey to God is personal to each individual. It may be spurred on by corporate activity but it is a personal and sacred experience of the individual. St Augustine remarked in the first paragraph of *The Confessions* that God created people for relationship with him and that "our hearts are restless until it rests" in God.⁴⁸ Intentional maturity, then, is a focused personal effort enhanced by corporate activity for the sake of personal spiritual growth.

This focused personal effort is generally characterized by some common characteristics. The first characteristic is that people will choose an activity or spiritual discipline that focuses on a particular spiritual weakness. When people exercise to build strength, they focus on the muscles that are weakest. When people exercise to build their spiritual lives, they should also focus on the spiritual muscles that are the weakest. Each spiritual discipline, when practiced generally, focuses attention on areas of spiritual weakness that the individual might like to strengthen. Jeremy Taylor, in the dedicatory preface to his classic on holy living (1650), points out the necessity to choose wisely disciplines that will make a difference. He writes, "If you intendest heartily to serve god, and avoid sin in any one instance, refuse not the hardest and most severe advice that is prescribed in order to it, though possibly is be a stranger to thee; for whatsoever it be, custom will make it easy."⁴⁹ Taylor also notes that if presented with several options or

⁴⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 1st ed., trans. by John Kenneth Ryan (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1960), 43.

⁴⁹ Jeremy Taylor and Thomas K. Carroll, *Selected Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 441.

disciplines, one should “observe which of them fits thy person or the circumstances of thy need, and use it rather than the other, that by this means thou mayest be engaged to watch and use spiritual arts and observations about thy soul.”⁵⁰ Truly, spiritual disciplines are tried and true forms of spiritual activity that have proven through time to bring transformation and provide strength and a deeper understanding and experience of God to the eager follower of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes of the spiritual disciplines that “such customs have only one purpose – to make the disciples more ready and cheerful to accomplish those things which God would have done.”⁵¹ When selected carefully to address a particular need, life transformation happens with great impact and the purposes of God are more often fulfilled.

A second characteristic common to intentional maturity is a commitment of significant time to spiritual practices. By practicing a spiritual discipline over time, maturity occurs because a spiritual value has been exercised routinely enough to go deep into the soul and cause permanent or long-term transformation. This is why real maturity rarely happens when a spiritual discipline is engaged in for a brief period of time, such as during a retreat. American culture is unfortunately built on this value of instant gratification, but this value is not available to the practice of spiritual disciplines. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. points out that “instant fulfillment of needs and desires allows no time for the long and rigorous path of disciplines.” “Yet,” he writes, “it is the path that brings true and lasting fulfillment, not the brief and fleeting appearances of fulfillment

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 169.

that disappears in the next moment”⁵² The use of the term “discipline” suggests that there is or will be time engaged in an exercise for the purpose of spiritual maturity.

A third characteristic often recognizable of intentional maturity is that the spiritual activity has had visible impact on one’s daily routine in life. Richard Foster emphasizes this point at the beginning of his landmark text on spiritual disciplines. He says of spiritual discipline that “the effect must be found in the ordinary junctures of human life,” in relationships from home to beyond one’s neighborhood.⁵³ Thus participating in a spiritual discipline ought to have a visible impact on how one’s life is lived in private and in public. Michael Wilkins, in his book, *In His Image*, refers to this as an “inside-out mentality” and suggests that when one focuses attention on “growing in spiritual intimacy with Jesus,” God prompts change outwardly.⁵⁴ He goes on to say that “as we develop His trusting, obedient nature, inward changes in our attitude toward God and others will result in changes in our outer behavior, changes that can be seen in the actions of our body.”⁵⁵ Wilkins also discusses how the biblical Pharisees missed this important value when they spent greater time trying to make their appearance look clean while neglecting the inner life values. Inner life transformation is absolutely necessary for life transformation of one’s outward behavior and character.

Intentional maturity happens when people bring the abundance of God into their lives in a fresh way. A challenge of this ministry focus paper will be to stress the

⁵² M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 102-103.

⁵³ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 1.

⁵⁴ Michael J. Wilkins, *In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 56.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

necessity for individual choice and initiative in selecting spiritual disciplines that are rarely prescribed and more often discovered along the journey. There is no general prescription for what list of activities or disciplines one should partake in to see this kind of spiritual maturity. Rather, intentional maturity is the process of discovering which spiritual discipline or disciplines will cause the greatest growth in the individual at a particular time and place in his or her life. It is certain that these three characteristics – focusing on a particular weakness, committing a significant amount of time, and effecting change in one’s life as a result – will be common in whatever avenue is chosen. The necessity of being intentional is what makes spiritual growth dynamic. An understanding and experience of God expands while individuals travel further along the journey towards spiritual maturity.

Identifying Disciplines that Stretch the Heart and Offer a Direct Encounter with God

Thirty years ago, Richard Foster suggested in his classic book on spiritual disciplines that “today there is an abysmal ignorance of the most simple and practical aspects of nearly all the classic Spiritual Disciplines.”⁵⁶ Despite drawing awareness to these forgotten or neglected practices, the spiritual disciplines have had very little impact in the Church. In fact, Webber has noted that the landscape of spirituality has changed in the last five decades and as a result there is a “new spirituality.”⁵⁷ This new spirituality is influenced by the new age movement and has resulted in a “simplified Christian

⁵⁶ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 3.

⁵⁷ Webber, *The Divine Embrace*, 107.

commitment to the very basic emphasis of an experience of Christ.”⁵⁸ Webber is hopeful that there can be a “return to an ancient spirituality” in which spirituality is centered in “God’s story as a comprehensive vision of the world, its history, and the meaning of human existence.”⁵⁹ Fortunately, there has been a resurgence of dialogue in these areas and more and more resources are becoming available to help followers of Christ choose to practice spiritual disciplines. Foster also noted that for the first-century Christian, the disciplines of fasting, meditation, worship, celebration and so on were “common knowledge,” and very little instruction was given or needed in order to practice these and other similar disciplines.⁶⁰ But today, practicing spiritual disciplines is foreign to most in a church like GCC. At GCC most are simply unfamiliar with various spiritual practices and disciplines, so it is difficult for these followers of Christ to know where to begin.

Again, it is important to remember that spiritual maturity best happens when one makes an effort to strengthen the weaker aspects of his or her spiritual life. That being the case, Mulholland suggests that disciplines are “the guardrails that keep the vehicle of our being on the road that leads through the stages of the pilgrimage toward wholeness in the image of Christ.”⁶¹ If believers will consider that the spiritual disciplines may function as “guardrails” then they might desire to examine their spiritual lives to find out where they are often going off the road. Where does the follower of Christ commonly get sidetracked and thrown off the journey? Making an effort to choose spiritual disciplines that will help keep oneself on the road to spiritual maturity will do just that if

⁵⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁰ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 3.

⁶¹ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 76.

believers are able to give themselves completely to the particular practices. As noted above, Paul's letter to the Philippians is crucial to understanding spiritual maturity. Therefore, Paul's instruction to his friends in Philippi affirms the necessity to choose wisely and practice hard the disciplines of spirituality. Paul writes, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13). Paul notes in this passage how important it is to "work out" or give attention to one's spiritual life and that it will require challenge and emotion that is intensive. Muller outlines this by noting that "the believer is called to self activity, to the active pursuit of the will of God, to the promotion of the spiritual life in himself, to the realization of the virtues of the Christian life, and to a personal application of salvation."⁶² Paul also notes at the end of this passage that while someone is working it out, God is good and faithful and assists them by also working in them for his purposes. Muller explains this by contending that the disciple "must *work out* what God in His grace has *worked in*."⁶³ The Holy Spirit embraces the eager follower of Christ. Choosing to establish the right "guardrails" will be difficult when people want to go their own ways, but the value is that God is given a chance to work out his salvation in them through the process.

There are many examples of purposeful selection of disciplines. For people who struggle to discover how to let the Holy Spirit guide them, choosing the practice of prayer can serve to create greater ability to hear God and let him lead. Likewise, people who struggle to be obedient to God's will might choose to practice the discipline of service. Practicing the spiritual discipline of service offers the opportunity to relinquish pride and

⁶² Müller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon*, 91.

⁶³ Ibid.

selfishness when required to place others first before oneself. This discipline can also serve to help people struggling with humility or a lack of gratitude. For people struggling with giving time to God, choosing to practice fasting can directly address the inability in their busy lives to give time to God. Fasting from food or some routine important practice can be beneficial when one replaces that activity with a spiritual activity or with prayer. Another example can be found in the spiritual discipline of silence. This discipline can serve to focus on being increasingly attentive to God by shutting out the noise and chatter of the world. Each of these disciplines, as well as others not discussed, is important in that willingness to practice any one of them can be freeing and allow more time, energy, or heart to be exposed to God's marvelous presence and work in one's life. All in all, the spiritually disciplined person is more likely to better serve God and his purposes and better experience God in all his fullness.