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ESTABLISHING THE NEW MEMBER ASSIMILATION
PROCESS OF AIRPORT BAPTIST CHURCH,
GREER, SOUTH CAROLINA

A Project
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry

by
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December 2020

APPROVAL SHEET

ESTABLISHING THE NEW MEMBER ASSIMILATION
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PREFACE

However unimpressive it may be for some, for me, this project is a major milestone. The years of study in preparation for and completion of this project have made an indelible mark on me. While the rigorous academic challenges were in themselves worth all the effort I expended, the work of God in my heart throughout the process is the immeasurable reward for which I am most deeply grateful. This project is the result of God's grace through some wonderful people He sent to walk beside my wife, Debbie, and me. We endured some difficult challenges, in spite of which the Lord provided much-needed support and did more than I could ask or imagine (Eph 3:20).

We all need people like Ananias, who will take us by the hand when we cannot see the way; as well as those like Barnabas, who through their words cheer us on. I have been enriched by many people who embody the work of Ananias, Barnabas, and especially the Lord Jesus. I want to express my gratitude to everyone who has loved the Lord, and me, His poor servant, enough to invest in my life through this process.

I will begin with the genuinely good and gracious people of the churches where I have served during my doctoral journey. I broke ground on this work in Sumter, South Carolina, and now reside in Taylors, South Carolina. It was never my or my wife's plan to uproot our family and begin anew in another field, but God's purposes prevailed and through the often-difficult process He kept us on mission and my studies alive. In every place He brought people to our side who helped fan the flame of our vision during times of loneliness. Many have come to our defense when the wind in our sails changed direction and became a storm in our path. I regret I cannot list every friend God has used to both enhance and impact our lives. Though a friend and mentor for more than thirty years, who was also instrumental in my decision to pursue post-graduate work, is Hal

Mayer, Executive Pastor at Church at the Springs in Ocala, Florida. Hal continues to sharpen me and inspire me to shun mediocrity and embrace our Lord's mission by his warm-hearted friendship, strong aversion to pretense, and a wholehearted commitment to Christ. Over the years he has helped me appreciate those closest to me and not to take myself too seriously through his love for his family and a willingness to laugh at himself (and everyone else). In addition to Hal, I am grateful to several others for their willingness to evaluate the leader's guide of my project, and in some cases even offer their endorsement. Other leaders like Johnny Hunt, Freddy Cardoza, and Frankie Melton gave of their valuable time to improve my work and they have my appreciation.

Another group who guided my journey through my doctoral studies with high expectations and grace are the men and women serving at, or associated with, the finest theological institution in the world, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. I owe a debt of thanks to people like Thom Rainer, Chuck Lawless, Michael Wilder, Shane Parker, Joe Harrod, and my editor, Betsy Fredrick. While expecting excellence, they offered guidance and gave me hope. Of all the gifted servants at Southern, one who has been instrumental to my progress by coaching and challenging me with compassion is my doctoral supervisor, Bill Henard. It would be rare to be touched by even one person in life with the love, wisdom, and godliness of those described above, but to know and have benefited from them is clearly God's overwhelming grace.

Of all the grace I have received from God in this life, second only to the joy of knowing Christ, is the precious woman who has been by my side, my beloved wife, Debbie. She has faithfully followed Him with me for these many years, and without her I could not have served Him well or completed this project.

Mark Bordeaux

Taylors, South Carolina

December 2020

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

According to research by Thom Rainer, “65 percent of churches are plateaued or declining.”¹ These figures are slightly better than the 2015 report by the same author who said nine out of ten churches were in decline.² It could also be said the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, shows signs of life. The number of churches increased by 270 in 2017, and overall giving for SBC churches increased by nearly \$267 million.³ Yet, in spite of these positive indicators, Lisa Green states “membership fell for the 11th consecutive year, to 15 million,” bringing the total loss of members since 2006 to nearly 1.3 million members.⁴ Worst of all, the same report revealed the number of baptisms continue an 11-year slide.

One of the 47,456 churches of the SBC is Airport Baptist Church (ABC) in Greer, South Carolina, which is the focus of this project. Not unlike the convention in which it is a member, ABC has reported a 75 percent decrease in membership in five years. In 2013, ABC had 389 members on their rolls. By 2018, that number had dropped

¹ Thom Rainer, “Dispelling the 80 Percent Myth of Declining Churches,” June 28, 2017, <https://thomrainer.com/2017/06/dispelling-80-percent-myth-declining-churches/>.

² Thom Rainer, “Four Major Ways Pastors Hinder Church Revitalization,” October 29, 2015, <http://thomrainer.com/2015/10/four-major-ways-pastors-hinder-church-revitalization/>.

³ Lisa Cannon Green, “Worship Attendance Rises, Baptisms Decline in SBC,” *Facts and Trends*, June 1, 2018, <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/06/01/worship-attendance-rises-baptisms-decline-in-sbc/>.

⁴ Green, “Worship Attendance Rises, Baptisms Decline in SBC.”

to 98.⁵ Remarkably, in this same period of time, average Sunday School attendance remained nearly the same with only a decrease of two (5 percent). Equally surprising is the total giving at ABC actually increased by 33 percent (\$160,408 to 213,690) from 2013 to 2018. ABC's drop in membership notwithstanding, the consistent numbers in small group Bible study and commitment to stewardship are indicators the remaining members may be a solid base for future growth. At the time of this project, church membership totaled 121.⁶

Demographics help church members understand the context in which they serve and those they hope to reach. For the purposes of this study, the immediate mission field of the church is limited to a radius of 2.5 miles. The population within this 2.5 mile radius is 36,489 and is projected to increase 15.3 percent in the next five years.⁷ This growth is faster than the 10.2 percent expected across the state in the same period of time.⁸ Projected growth in the area by 2024 is estimated to be “5,581 to a total population of 42,070.”⁹ This report indicates that family households are growing faster than the population. The likely reason for this is the addition of children to the households. The increase in the number of children limits the average age to a small increase. The average age for the study area only climbs 2.2 percent and is expected to be 41.25.¹⁰

⁵ South Carolina Baptist Convention, “Convention Annuals,” accessed October 2, 2019, <http://www.scbaptist.org/convention-annuals/>.

⁶ See appendix 1.

⁷ MissionInsite, “ExecutiveInsite Report,” accessed September 21, 2019, <https://www.missioninsite.com>, 2.

⁸ MissionInsite, “ExecutiveInsite Report,” 2.

⁹ MissionInsite, “ExecutiveInsite Report,” 2.

¹⁰ MissionInsite, “ExecutiveInsite Report,” 4.

The largest segment of the population within the study area in five years is expected to number 10,026 and remain those between the age of 35 to 54.¹¹ The same research projects only two age groups to increase in the next ten years; those aged 25 to 34 and those nearing retirement age 65 and older.¹² The average age of residents within the study area is currently 40.38 and is to remain virtually unchanged through 2029 when it is expected to be 41.88.¹³

Demographic research projects average household income to climb. If these projections are accurate, then the number of households earning more than \$75,000 a year will increase as those earning less will slightly decrease.¹⁴ Seventy-six percent of the population is employed in a white-collar job.¹⁵ The occupations with the largest segments of the population in the study area are professional specialty (29.6 percent), managerial executive (21.4 percent), and office administration (12.3 percent).

Another helpful way of understanding the mission field around ABC is recognizing each generation's differing values and perspectives. Those born within the same generation share similar life experiences and generally have common expectations and values. To connect to those in one's mission field it is helpful to understand them. MissionInsite offers projected changes in the population within the study area and bases the generational categories on William Strauss and Neil Howe's book, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy*.¹⁶

¹¹ MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 5.

¹² MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 5.

¹³ MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 4.

¹⁴ MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 7.

¹⁵ MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 12.

¹⁶ William Strauss and Neil Howe, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997).

Millennials (those born between 1982 and 2004) will account for 29 percent of the population of the study area through 2029.¹⁷ This generation is followed by Generation X (1961-1981) at 28 percent, the Homeland generation (born after 2005) at 22 percent, and Boomers (1946-1960) at 16 percent.¹⁸ If members of ABC hope to connect with those around them and multiply disciples into future generations, they would be wise to get to know their neighbors and understand how to best build relationships and communicate the gospel to them.

Currently, ABC has a close-knit fellowship with a core group of devoted, long-time Christ-followers. At the time of this writing, there were 107 members between the ages of 8 and 95. In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented the church from gathering. When the church reopened, they met for worship in the Family Life Center to allow for social distancing. The average attendance was 75, 20 less than before the pandemic. Ten of the most vulnerable senior adults no longer attend for safety reasons. Another 10 have stopped attending because ABC has temporarily discontinued the children's church and nursery. ABC provides a live feed of their services every Sunday morning via Facebook.

The median age of church members is 62. The importance of every church making disciples cannot be overstated, but churches with ABC's median age in the sixties must take immediate action if they are to leave a healthy church for future generations. The challenge to make disciples of younger generations may be daunting to older members but could also be viewed as a great opportunity. Each member should pray for opportunities to build relationships with their younger neighbors in hopes of seeing them follow Christ.

¹⁷ MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 14.

¹⁸ MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 14.

To help ensure those reached with the gospel are mentored to multiply and mature into a healthy church for future generations, the leadership of ABC chose to require all new members to complete a basic discipleship course. As a part of this project, I provided the course to be used in the training.

These efforts were consistent with the Lord's commission to "make disciples" (Matt 28:18-20) and were therefore fundamental to the purpose of the church. ABC began to take necessary steps toward revitalization as the pastor and people were focused on becoming a healthy, discipling church for future generations. One essential part of being healthy is determining to be intentional about the assimilation of new members for discipleship. This project attempted to establish an effective assimilation process for new members at ABC.

Context

Church leaders should consider the context in which the church exists when attempting to reach the community. The attitudes and expectations of members, as well as local residents who visit ABC, are determined, to some degree, by the social milieu of the community as well as the culture of the church membership.

Since ABC's members are presently involved in the local community and focused "on the faith and culture for a particular people," ABC fits Dudley and Johnson's definition of a "pillar church," although it also shares similarities with their concept of a "pilgrim church."¹⁹ As a "pillar church," ABC is "anchored" to the town of Greer and Greenville County.²⁰ The majority of members have lived in the area most of their lives and have close ties with family and friends throughout the area. These relationships intersect with one another through local schools, children's sports, as well as city and

¹⁹ Carl Dudley and Sally A. Johnson, *Energizing the Congregation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 4-5.

²⁰ Dudley and Johnson, *Energizing the Congregation*, 3.

community life. The attractiveness of Greenville and the Upstate of South Carolina will continue to contribute to growth in the study area. Population of the study area is projected to reach 42,070 by 2024, a 15.3 percent increase. Growth is expected to lag in the five years that follow. The population growth between 2024 and 2029 is expected to slow to 4.6 percent.²¹

Contextual Challenges to Consider

Changing cultural attitudes toward church membership and sharing personal information may very well influence a guest's willingness to connect with the body of believers at ABC.

The need for insight. Knowing what other pastors in the area have found effective when attempting to gain contact information from their guests will be helpful. The Southern Baptist pastors in the area lead churches in the Three Rivers Baptist Association (TRBA). The churches of the TRBA total 110 and are scattered throughout "Greenville County, Northern Greenville County, as well as Spartanburg County"²² of South Carolina. Most of these churches are located in rural settings.

Generations to consider. Another factor that may influence a guest's openness to connect with ABC is his or her age. It is natural that people of different ages respond differently when asked to share contact information. It has been my experience that many people prefer to stay anonymous for some time before entrusting a church with their personal information. Age may also be a factor in how a new members' class is perceived. In some settings, adults middle-age and above who have been long-time members from other churches are reluctant to attend a new member class. Older

²¹ MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 2.

²² Randy Bradley, Director of Missions for Three Rivers Baptist Association, email to author, August 28, 2018.

generations are less likely to have seen a class for new members in their previous churches. The older generations who have been church members for many years may resist attempts to be enlisted in a new members' class and argue that they already know all that is needed.

As shown earlier, ABC's age groups do not reflect the age groups of the population within the five-mile radius surrounding the church. On the surface, one would not be surprised if members of ABC more naturally connected with senior adults in the community because of the number of members at or above the age of 65 (49). The challenge before ABC is not only to reach younger adults but to maintain unity as God blesses their efforts. In some instances, the generation gap within some churches has hindered growth and caused division. Fortunately, most senior adults attending ABC appear to be gracious and have demonstrated a willingness to welcome younger visitors and families. Although there was some resistance to requiring a discipleship course for those desiring membership, it appears older members are not primarily focused on themselves but have a desire to see future generations gathering for worship at ABC.

The color bar. ABC is predominantly a white congregation but is welcoming to people of different races and cultures. The church membership includes two members who are African American. Additionally, ABC's pastor, Mark Lawing, reports that a couple who have immigrated to the United States with their children from Africa worship with them regularly. "We have a family of five who are African."²³ He explains the wife is from Kenya and the husband is from Ghana. Eight percent of the study area is Black/African American. The next largest number of non-whites within five miles of the church is made up of Hispanic/Latino residents (7 percent), then Asian (6 percent).²⁴

²³ Mark Lawing, Pastor of Airport Baptist Church, email to author, September 26, 2019.

²⁴ MissionInsite, "ExecutiveInsite Report," 3.

Back to school. Another contextual factor that may affect assimilation is the educational level of guests. It was conceivable that those who have struggled to complete high school may be intimidated by the thought of attending a class. This concern should not be a factor for ABC. Educational attainment of adults in the study area over the age of 25 who have earned a bachelor's or graduate degree remains almost the same through 2024 and is greater than the state average. Demographic information indicates the state will have 17 percent earning bachelor's degrees and almost 10 percent earning graduate degrees while the study area around ABC is projected to have 31 percent and 20 percent earning undergraduate and graduate degrees respectively. Together, these figures represent half of the people within a 2.5-mile radius of the church. Nearly 20 percent have some college and almost 18 percent have finished high school or obtained a GED. Therefore, it is not likely that guest cards or other means of connecting and communicating with guests present a problem with newcomers. The educational level of people in the area may only affect assimilation if the new members' class is viewed as similar to a class at school where the emphasis is on academics. It is important they think of the encouragement and opportunities provided by this class rather than a scholastic atmosphere.

Inward attitudes. Perhaps the greatest contextual consideration is an attitudinal issue that actually comes from within the church and naturally supports the assimilation process. The welcoming atmosphere and outgoing nature of the pastor and a few of the members sometimes results in information about guests being gained naturally, which is by far the best means. This thoughtful hospitality is far better than churches where the mindset of preoccupied long-time members could negatively affect assimilation.

ABC's new member class has become an indispensable part of the assimilation process and is required of those wishing to be members.²⁵ Attitudinal issues among members could potentially influence newcomers' views of the class. If their friends who are members do not enthusiastically encourage them to attend, or worse yet, they minimize the importance of the class, then one would not be surprised if a new member or guest was resistant to attend.

The expectation of leadership as well as the support of church members for the new member training process would potentially determine the effectiveness of assimilation. How to influence the willingness of guests to make a connection with ABC, participate in new member training, and begin the discipleship journey were explored in this project.

Meet the pastor. The final contextual consideration in the assimilation process is the leadership style of the pastor. Mark Lawing began leading ABC in April 2016 and is the only paid staff at the church. Current average worship attendance and the support of deacons, yokefellow, and volunteers allows him to lead as a “player-coach.” Lawing demonstrates many admirable qualities of a godly pastor. He is zealous for God and His Word, and at the same time demonstrates humility, love, patience, and grace. Lawing understands the importance of making disciples for the church to be biblical, healthy, and reproducing. He enthusiastically supports efforts to establish an assimilation strategy that centers on discipleship.

²⁵ Mark Lawing explains, “The Deacons and Yoke Fellows voted that before anybody from this point forward can become a member they have to go through the new member’s class and commit to coming to Sunday School.” Mark Lawing, pastor of Airport Baptist Church, email to author, October 4, 2019. ABC Bylaws include Yoke Fellows among the church officers along with deacons, trustees, clerk, and treasurer—Article 4 Section 2. At ABC, “the Yokefellow [sic] Ministry is comprised of men serving alongside the pastor and deacons to meet the pastoral needs of the congregation and community”—Section 5. A Yoke Fellow is described as “a spiritually mature Christian Man”—Section 5. A Yoke Fellow is distinguished from a deacon in that a Yoke Fellow “is not ordained” and “attends deacon’s meetings only as requested”—Section 5.

Rationale

To fulfill the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ, disciples must be made. Disciplemaking includes both the conversion and spiritual formation of the disciple. The former is an event in time, while the latter is an ongoing process, but both require relationships that only the Body of Christ can provide. Therefore, it is not only essential, it is non-negotiable, that a Christ-follower actively participate in the functions of the church if they are to mature in their relationship with Christ. Assimilation into the local church is an integral part of the Great Commission.

Some may sincerely ask, “Why would you wish to invest a great deal of time and effort in a project on assimilation?” Their thinking is understandable for several reasons. First, assimilation may seem to be a natural by-product of people who have come to know Christ. Also, the Spirit’s indwelling presence should resolve any question about their participation in worship. People who are born again are still fallen people living in a fallen world. Left to themselves, without encouragement and with little or no knowledge of Scripture, new believers may be easily distracted and fall away.

The second reason good people may not view assimilation as a priority is their view of the Great Commission. For them, the main responsibility of Christians is only to “win” people to Christ. The idea of helping the new convert become a multiplying disciple through spiritual formation is overlooked. If one were fully convinced of the grave consequences awaiting those without a relationship with Christ, it would be strange if they did not see personal evangelism as their priority. Unfortunately, while they may not be lacking in zeal, their knowledge of the Great Commission comes up short. The genius of Jesus’ strategy,²⁶ if properly understood, results in multiplication of disciples rather than addition. Unwittingly, many have feverishly worked to make one convert

²⁶ Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993), 4.

when they could have invested themselves in someone and made a disciple who would also make disciples.

A third misconception some believers may have regarding assimilation is that it is simply unnecessary. Their opinion may be expressed, “If people are kept happy, they will not leave.” Again, there is a grain of truth in this statement, but it cannot be accepted because the premise is faulty. Those who hold this view have misunderstood the purpose of the church and how the Lord Jesus intends for His church to grow.

Ultimately, it may be that some critics of an emphasis on assimilation have misunderstood the mission of believers. They may not only presume the spiritual growth of a new believer will occur naturally and their job is done when someone is saved, but they may fail to see assimilation is meant to be a part of the disciple-making process. It is difficult to understand how a believer could resist methods to increase assimilation unless they do not see the methods as directly related to the mission of the church found in Matthew 28:18-20.²⁷

One who is fully assimilated would have been taught the basics of the Word, become part of a small group, serve in a ministry, and understand the purpose of the church, as well as God’s desire for unity among His people. A mature believer would, not only be more committed, but also less likely to allow issues to remain unresolved and ultimately leave the church. Assimilation should be seen as an essential part of the discipleship process and therefore, absolutely necessary for a church to fulfill her mission. If ABC is to faithfully fulfill the Great Commission, assimilation of new members must be understood as a necessary part of the discipleship process. This project seeks to establish an assimilation strategy that is not only effective, but also understood and supported by the church membership. If healthy, biblical church growth is to occur and the current trend reversed, effective assimilation must be accomplished.

²⁷ See also Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to establish the assimilation process of Airport Baptist Church by introducing changes that will ultimately result in an increase in the number of new members actively participating in the mission of the church.

Goals

Five goals guided this project. These goals encapsulate ABC's mission statement: "Airport Baptist Church's mission is to love God and Worship Him as we Reach and Disciple Others for Christ."

1. The first goal was to find the most effective ways to gather personal contact information from guests in order to invite them to participate in ABC's new member class.
2. The second goal was to write a six-session curriculum for the membership class with supplemental video to provide the essential information and encouragement necessary to enable a prospective member to follow Christ as an active part of ABC.
3. The third goal of this project was to hold a six-week new member class attended by at least 25 percent of visitors who provided contact information.
4. The fourth goal was to increase the knowledge of meaningful church membership among participants at the new member class.
5. The fifth goal was for 80 percent of those completing the new member class to join a small group and 75 percent of those completing it and becoming a church member to begin participating in a ministry at ABC.

Research Methodology

Fulfillment of the five goals required research, experimentation, and application. The mission of ABC to make disciples who multiply disciples requires the ability to connect with guests. Connections are made in hopes that a relationship may be established that results in salvation and assimilation for discipleship. Through a relationship with the guest it is possible to encourage them to participate in the new member class. During the class, relationships were strengthened, theological and practical information were shared, and encouragement given, allowing the participants to hear the gospel explained and better understand what it means to follow Christ through church membership at ABC. The establishment of the assimilation process of ABC is expected

to continue to directly impact the church's effort to fulfill the mission of making disciples.

The first goal toward the completion of this project was to determine which methods of obtaining contact information from guests yield the most responses and the largest amount of contact information. To begin, I created a simple survey using Google Forms.²⁸ Area pastors were emailed and asked to complete an online survey to determine what methods are most productive in obtaining contact information from guests.²⁹ The first contact was by email. Pastors were given a week to respond. Those who did not respond within a week received a follow-up email. Of the 110 churches that are a part of TRBA, my goal was that 10 pastors or their representatives would reply. However, 6 replied, and I tabulated the responses and suggested implementation of several methods during the trial period.³⁰ Ultimately, the pastor continued to use his method of obtaining contact information from guests.

Next, I developed a curriculum and a leader's guide to use for ABC's new member class.³¹ This step was done with the help of a panel of experts consisting of one professor, one South Carolina Baptist Convention (SCBC) Church Health Group leader, and three pastors. They were first contacted by email with a description of my project, the need to develop the content of the new member class, as well as an explanation of the process. At the same time, I solicited their help and described the review process. Once a member of the panel of experts agreed to evaluate the leader's guide, it was sent to them so they could begin.

²⁸ See appendix 2. All of the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

²⁹ See appendix 3.

³⁰ See appendix 4

³¹ See appendix 5

This panel reviewed the leader's guide for the curriculum and returned their recommendations based upon a provided rubric.³² Workshop sessions were revised in light of feedback received. When the average rubric score was satisfactory or better, this goal was accomplished.

As I continued writing and editing the current curriculum, I allowed for two weeks to enlist the panel. Four weeks were needed to allow for the leader's guide to be reviewed and returned for revision. At the conclusion of the process, I expressed my appreciation to the panel by providing a final draft of the new member class material to them along with a note of thanks containing a gift card. Two additional weeks were added to the process to allow for unexpected delays. Originally, I had planned for eleven weeks to complete this portion of the project. It was a greater undertaking than I had anticipated and the entire writing and editing process took 24 weeks. I finished the curriculum one week before I was to teach the class and sent Lawing the student guide so he could have it printed.

The third goal was to enroll 25 percent of the guests who had provided contact information into the new member class. The goal of 25 percent was measured by comparing the number of guests who have submitted contact information in the prior three-month period to the number enrolled in the workshop. Failure to reach the goal of 25 percent enrollment did not cancel the course. The project continued and the workshop was conducted. Make-up sessions were offered to members who missed a class.

The fourth goal concerned the effectiveness of the new member class to increase the class participants' knowledge of Scripture and was assessed by the comparison of a pre- and post-workshop survey.³³ This survey was preceded by an introductory explanation indicating that completion of the survey was agreement to

³² See appendix 6.

³³ See appendix 7.

participate in the doctoral project. The survey consisted of 25 statements and a Likert scale for responses. The statements range from an indication of having received Christ as Savior, to knowledge of the tithe, and understanding of ABC's support of the SBC. Other topics included eternal security, spiritual gifts, the mission of the church, response to offense, and view of glossolalia. Any ambiguity in the participant's basic beliefs should come to light.

To ensure confidentiality, those participating in the survey were instructed to place a personal information number (PIN) on both the pre- and post-survey. The use of PIN numbers allowed accurate comparison of surveys while preserving privacy. Honesty and accuracy were encouraged by the knowledge that their responses would remain confidential. Following the post-survey, I reviewed the statements so that class members may know how well they did. Students were encouraged to contact their pastor or me privately if they had a question they would rather not discuss among the other members of the class. Following a review of the pre- and post-surveys, an evaluation was made as to whether the group would benefit from a follow-up meeting for clarification. The results were also used to highlight areas that may need greater emphasis in subsequent workshops.

The final goal of this project had two parts: the connection of attendees to a small group for discipleship and the participation of new members in a ministry of the church. First, every workshop completer who was not already connected to a small group was encouraged to sign up for the group of their choosing during the closing session of the new member class. They were assured that they would be contacted by the leader of the group who will help them get to know other group members. This step was not a surprise. Early in the new member class it was introduced as a part of following Christ as a member of the church. This project assumed that some workshop participants could be non-Christians and some participants may have already been believers. Both Christians and non-believers were invited to join small groups although with decidedly differing

purposes: I encouraged the class to join a small group, I knew Christians needed a place of fellowship and growth. At the same time, I knew any non-Christians who may have been present needed to be connected to a small group for the purpose of continuing evangelism. This portion of the goal was measured by maintaining statistics on the number of workshop completers who joined a small group within three weeks of finishing the course. My goal was to have at least 80 percent of completers join a small group.

The second part of this final goal was to involve workshop completers in the work of ministry. Unlike the first part of this goal, the degree of involvement in ministry and the responsibility entrusted was predicated upon one being a Christian and accepted into church membership. As workshop attendees learned about following Christ and serving in His church, they should have become aware of expectations encouraged of all members. Unlike many current church members who do not know how to share the gospel, their responsibility to use their gifts, the mission of the church, or even the importance of regular attendance and stewardship, those who completed the new member class had a clear picture of the great privilege that is theirs as a believer serving Christ at ABC. This goal was measured by the number of workshop completers who joined the church and who went on to serve in a church ministry within three weeks. This goal was to have at least 75 percent of those who completed the workshop *and* joined the church to begin serving in a church ministry at ABC.

Once these goals had been accomplished, people who once may have felt uneasy about their place in God's plan, as well as their part in ABC, should have established several meaningful relationships through their small group and be worshipping, serving, and growing as a vital part of His church. As a result, some of the future attenders of the new member class may very well be their friends and family who have been influenced by their life.

Definitions and Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms are used in the ministry project:

Assimilate. For the purposes of this project, “assimilate” specifically refers to the process of integrating or absorbing a believer or disciple into the fellowship of a local church so that they are actively participating in the mission of the church.

Disciple. From μαθητής; disciple, pupil, follower,³⁴ a disciple is one who has professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, has been baptized by immersion, and is seeking to know and obey the Lord Jesus Christ and join Him in making disciples. Also known as an apprentice, a learner. See Christ-follower, believer.³⁵

Discipleship. The process that occurs when those who have been evangelized choose to follow Christ by participating in an intentional relationship with at least one other Christ-follower for the purpose of learning more about Christ, becoming more like Him and helping others become disciples as well.

Revitalization. The process in which a church’s passion for Christ and His purpose for the church is restored and becomes central to the pastor and members.

The first delimitation of this project was the necessity to restrict it to a period of 33 weeks. This period allowed time to survey area pastors, test methods of gathering information, write and edit curriculum for the new member class, promote and conduct the workshop, and conclude with a one-week period for evaluation of the class. Another delimitation was the number of pastors I could survey regarding methods of assimilation. At the time of this writing, the Three-Rivers Baptist Association has 110 churches. A final delimitation would be the number of non-members who could have potentially attended the new member class at ABC. ABC could only invite non-members who attend or have shared their contact information.

³⁴ Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies, 1993), s.v. “disciple.”

³⁵ C.f. Luke 6:40, 9:23, 14:26-27, 33.

Conclusion

Like all churches, Airport Baptist Church is unique in her history, context, and membership. Yet, even with the distinctions, she and all churches share a common mission from God as well as common challenges of ministry. Many of these challenges may be overcome through wise leadership and practical strategies. Under no circumstances should it be perceived that any church could overcome challenges and be truly successful without the merciful Shepherd's guidance. It was hoped the success of this project would help ABC's efforts to obey the Great Commission by more effectively assimilating members that understand and commit to Christ and His mission for the church. It must be acknowledged that in the future, the church must continue and perhaps even more fervently seek to submit to and glorify the Head of the church—the Lord Jesus Christ. Only then will the church know His blessings.

CHAPTER 2
THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR
ESTABLISHING AN ASSIMILATION PROCESS

Both the Old and New Testaments show how the assimilation of outsiders into fellowship with God’s people has occurred through historical examples, doctrine, and epistles. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ comprises people who were outsiders and formerly alien to the promises of God; therefore, God expects His church to unite with repentant newcomers for His glory.

Welcoming Outsiders as a Part of God’s Plan

Assimilation is not a popular term among average churchgoers. Still, the concept should be familiar to anyone who understands biblical evangelism and discipleship. The whole of God’s special revelation displays His desire to bring outsiders into fellowship with Him and His people. Yet, for some, the term *assimilation* is repulsive and nonbiblical. These critics believe those who focus on assimilation are elevating “programs over people” and their motives are purely pragmatic.¹ For those who follow God’s example of including people in His plan, however, assimilation is not only biblical and expected, but it is also a work only God can fully accomplish. Further, the assimilation of new believers is a part of biblical discipleship and is essential for unity within the church. This chapter offers exegesis of several biblical texts as examples of God’s people assimilating outsiders.

¹ James Tippins, “How Assimilation in the Church Has Subverted the Gospel,” December 31, 2016, <https://jamestippins.com/2016/12/how-assimilation-in-the-church-has-subverted-the-gospel/>.

Genesis 12:1-3 The Faith of One Facilitates Blessing for All

The first man and woman enjoyed unity with God and one another before sin entered God's creation and caused division. Disobedience broke the intimate relationship Adam and Eve enjoyed with God in the garden (Gen 3:8-10). As a result, sin broke relationships within their family (Gen 4:8). Interpersonal strife, family disunity, church division, and the age-old tendency to separate along racial, ethnic, economic, and social lines are all byproducts of the Fall. The call of Abram launched God's strategy to restore mankind's relationship with Himself through the "Seed" of the woman (Gen 3:15). Ryle states, "Abram is to lay the foundations of the Chosen People."² God's special revelation of Scripture is the epic story of God's efforts to bless all mankind by reconciling fallen people to Himself. This blessing is available in the Person of Christ through Abram's line and realized with Abram's faith.

Contrary to the biblical evidence, some may argue that God causes division rather than reconciliation. They may point to the confusion of languages that came because of the Babel fiasco (Gen 11:1-9). Others may quote Christ's own words in Matthew 10:34-36: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."³

Further, some may suggest the fact that God chose certain people like Abram for His purpose as evidence of God dividing rather than uniting mankind. God does not play favorites. Readers should see these divisions considering their context and God's ongoing effort to bring those who separated from Him to "complete unity" (John 17:23).

² Herbert E. Ryle, *The Book of Genesis*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921), 155.

³ All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

When God chose Abram and promised to bless him it was for the good of all mankind. Walter Kaiser writes, “The sweep of all the evidence makes it abundantly clear that God’s gift of a blessing through the instrumentality of Abraham was to be experienced by nations, clans, tribes, people groups, and individuals. It would be for every size of group, from the smallest people group to the greatest nation group.”⁴

The disunity, which occurred because of the confusion of languages by God, was to prevent a superficial and transitory unity. Man’s efforts to bring different people together may appear to be laudable but will always come up short because of mankind’s sinful nature. It is no coincidence God included the story of the tower of Babel a mere twenty-two verses before the account of Abram’s call. When man promotes superficial unity around human pride God is not pleased. He purposes to introduce genuine unity through His Son (Eph 2:11-22).

The people who united for the purpose of building a tower did not do so to bring blessing to mankind and glory to God. By their own admission, the goal of uniting to build a tower was to accomplish two things: they wanted to “make a name” for themselves and “not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:4). Pride was the basis of their unity. Any effort to build unity for the purpose of promoting the attributes of one group over another is evil and invites disunity. Worst of all, the unity they sought to build at a “plain in Shinar” would eliminate their need for God.

Every broken relationship can be traced back to man’s broken relationship with his Creator. God chose Abram for the purpose of extending the blessing of a personal relationship with Him to all mankind. Mathews agrees, “Although the call is directed to the individual Abram, it is intended ultimately for the salvation of the world’s peoples.”⁵

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 11.

⁵ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, The New American Commentary, vol. 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 109.

Those who believe God as Abram did will enjoy the blessing of joining God's family as "Abraham's offspring" (Rom 9:8) because "those who believe are children of Abraham" (Gal 3:7).

The first step God told Abram to take toward being a blessing to all nations was a step of separation: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household" (Gen 12:1). The unity of people coming together as one under Christ begins by separation as well. God invites those who wish to experience unity with Christ to come to Him and expected to forsake everything to follow Him.⁶ The Lord Jesus Christ expected the love and allegiance of His followers is to exceed all other loyalties. Christ's expectation may well result in division, but the blessing of unity around Christ is available for all.

God promised Abram: "I will make your name great" (Gen 12:2) showing as Mathews states, "Abram's influence will be widespread, even across generations."⁷ God used Abram's faith to influence people of all ages, ethnic groups, and backgrounds to leave their past behind and follow Him. The promise to bless (Gen 12:2-3) "reveal[ed] a divine plan to extend blessings to all the families of the earth."⁸ The church must remember Abraham's journey and assimilate those who have left their former life to follow God.

Nehemiah 3: Former Enemies Become Fellow Builders

The broad blessing promised to "all peoples on earth" (Gen 12:3b) through Abram was exceedingly gracious and inclusive. Scripture connects this benefit of blessing to a warning as severe as the blessings are rich. The same Lord who promised to bless "all peoples" even as He has blessed Abram, warns that He will curse whoever curses Abram. God reveals the harsh reality that He will not bless everyone with the relationship Abram

⁶ Cf. Matt 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 10:37, 16:24, 19:27; Luke 5:11, 9:23.

⁷ Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 114.

⁸ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 132.

enjoys with Him; rather they will suffer alienation from Him. God included some outsiders among His people even though He previously placed them under a curse and commanded His people to destroy them. One example of this is the people known as the Gibeonites. The Israelites considered the Gibeonites enemies, but after the people of God assimilated them, they became a blessing to them.

Nehemiah 3 describes different people from different walks of life working shoulder to shoulder to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. There is a brief mention of the men working next to Joiada and Paseah in verse 7: "Next to them, repairs were made by men from Gibeon."

This comment seems unremarkable until the reader understands the background. For men of Gibeon to be working alongside the men of Israel is strange considering Israel was to destroy their ancestors. The thought of former enemies as partners is all the more striking when one considers their work—building. They were helping to build a wall to protect them from their enemies and that is who the Gibeonites once were—enemies of Israel. The ones the Israelites were to destroy and whose walls they were to tear down were now helping them build walls around Jerusalem.

Nehemiah and the other Jews who risked their lives rebuilding the walls did so because they believed Scripture. From his knowledge of Leviticus (Lev 26:30-33), Nehemiah knew invading armies had taken Israel captive and led them away from their homes to other countries because of their idolatry and failure to repent (Neh. 1:8). He also believed that if they repented, God would mercifully bring them back to the place He had "chosen as a dwelling for [His] Name" (Neh 1:9). There should be no doubt he also knew from Scripture the origin and uniqueness of the relationship between Israel and the Gibeonites.

According to the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, the Gibeonites were originally part of the nations of Canaan around "el-Jib some 5½ miles north of

Jerusalem.”⁹ God gave clear rules how His people were to identify with the peoples of the area. He told Israel to annihilate people living in the land God had given to them (Deut 20:16-17). The people of Gibeon were among those who were under the ban and God said they were to be “completely destroyed” (Deut 20:17, Heb. חָרַם) by Israel. Israel was not to let them live, much less live with them. Bratcher and Hatton point out specifically, “The Hebrew is literally ‘You shall not allow to live all [or, every] breathing being.’”¹⁰

When the people of Canaan learned the fate of Jericho and Ai, they realized they were facing utter ruin and there were only two possible responses: stay and fight or attempt to escape by other means. Six kings led their people against Israel and fought for survival. The people of Gibeon had a different plan. The NIV refers to it as a “ruse” (Josh 9:4). Using “guile” or “cunning” (Heb. עֲרִמָה), they fabricated a story. Through their prevarication, they led Joshua to believe they were “from a very distant country” (Josh 9:6 ESV). After three days, Joshua made a covenant with them, ensuring their protection.

When Joshua knew the truth about the Gibeonites and realized they had deceived him, he pronounced a curse (Heb. אָרַר) upon them. They would forever be servants by doing such work as cutting wood and drawing water (Josh 9:27). Fortunately for the people of Gibeon, this declaration of this curse (Heb. אָרַר, Josh 9:23) differs from the utter destruction (Heb. חָרַם) they would have experienced.¹¹

The people murmured against Joshua for his decision to admit the Gibeonites into the congregation. He told them they would uphold their oath to the Gibeonites so they

⁹ John A. Thompson, “Gibeon, Gibeonites,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 863.

¹⁰ Robert G. Bratcher and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Deuteronomy*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 345.

¹¹ The word used for “curse” (אָרַר) is used 175 times (the most used word for “curse” in the Old Testament) in numerous contexts, most notably of which is Deut 27–28, where Moses lists the numerous consequences of disobeying God.

themselves would not incur God's wrath (Josh 9:18-20). They were to be true to their promise of accepting these outsiders even if they were different and it were unpopular.

It did not take long for Israel's new neighbors to test their commitment. Upon hearing of Gibeon's agreement with Israel, Adoni-Zedek, king of Jerusalem, enlisted the help of the five Amorite kings to attack Gibeon (Josh 10:3-5).

When Joshua received the Gibeonite's plea to "come up to us quickly and save us" (Josh 10:6), he and his army marched toward Gibeon. Even though Joshua had not sought the Lord's guidance when considering the Gibeonites' claim of coming from a faraway land and the Gibeonites had found protection through guile, the Lord assured him He would be true to the covenant Joshua made: "Do not be afraid of them; I have given them into your hand. Not one of them will be able to withstand you" (Josh 10:8). God now protected the Gibeonites as His own.

Years later, Saul did not have the same concern for the Gibeonites or God's wrath. As a result, the nation suffered a three-year famine. The Lord did not record exactly how Saul set out to destroy the Gibeonites, but He told David, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death" (2 Sam 21:1). The Gibeonites themselves described Saul as "the man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel" (2 Sam 21:5).

The Lord included Saul's house along with Saul in His indictment because his family were coconspirators with Saul against the Gibeonites. To assuage the anger of the Gibeonites for this crime and to lift the judgement of God, the people handed over seven of Saul's male descendants to the Gibeonites for execution. The death of these descendants of Saul satisfied the Gibeonites and God, and "God answered prayer in behalf of the land" (2 Sam 21:4b).

How Joshua and Saul treated the former outsiders was important to God. The Lord's response to each situation reveals how He views our promises and how He expects

us to treat those who have become a part of His people through covenant. The Lord is against those who would divide His people.

The image of Gibeonites working alongside Israelites years after Joshua made the covenant is relevant for churches assimilating outsiders today. It is proof God can bring even unlikely outsiders who behave in ignoble ways into fellowship with His people through covenant. The story of the Gibeonites serves as a reminder to God's people today to treat new members as part of the family of God rather than outsiders. The Lord showed His mercy toward these outsiders, and when other nations threatened them, He acted to assure their protection.

Israel made a covenant with these newcomers, and God expected them to be true to it. Similarly, Israel assigned duties to the Gibeonites and held them accountable in fulfillment. The covenant bound Israel to assimilate and protect them as well as bind them to support Israel and follow God's commands. Their common purpose now united the descendants of these Israelites and Gibeonites who first met in Canaan in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. That Israel assimilated the Gibeonites proves both groups fulfilled their responsibilities.

Worship is a priority. Even when Nehemiah and his companions returned to Jerusalem from captivity and saw the city lacked walls for their safety, they determined to worship. According to Williamson, worship required "that fire should be kept burning continually on the altar."¹² Originally, they assigned the Gibeonites to the tasks of cutting wood and drawing water for the people and for the "altar of the Lord" (Josh 9:27). By the time Nehemiah led the group to Jerusalem, this assignment belonged to "the priests, the Levites and the people" (Neh 10:34). Israel assimilated the Gibeonites and they no longer labored under a segregated assignment.

¹² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 16 (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 336.

After archaeological excavations, it is known that the “Gibeonites survived among Israel as permanent residents.”¹³ The church must choose whether to view outsiders as former enemies or new friends. The same grace God provides one group is equally available to others, so all may escape destruction and enjoy fellowship with God’s people. God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, can cross all barriers for those who will enter a covenant relationship with Him. People who church members formerly considered outsiders and even enemies may become co-laborers working shoulder-to-shoulder with other Christ-followers. Unity is possible because the Lord takes covenants seriously.

John 15:1-17: Those Who Remain in Christ Remain in Fellowship

Resources on church member assimilation use a practical approach when treating the subject. They offer helpful recommendations and strategies as ways to strengthen new church members’ participation in church ministries and programs. As needful as these books, videos, and seminars on assimilation may be, they rarely address the phenomenon of members who disappear because of a spiritual issue.¹⁴ To find little available dealing with spiritual causes of attrition is not surprising for it is much simpler to develop strategies that increase new member involvement than to tackle the sometimes difficult to discern potential unregenerate state of some members. The elusive key to new members’ long-term involvement may be as simple as understanding Jesus’ challenge to abide in Him (John 15:1-17).

¹³ David M. Howard, *Joshua: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: B & H, 1998), 269.

¹⁴ A Google search for “church membership assimilation resources” produced “about 119 results” (per Google) from which 35 web pages specifically addressed the subject of the search and only two included brief comments on the spiritual aspect of assimilation. Additional searches of “church member assimilation” and “church member retention” produced 296 and 510 results respectively and none contained information on the spiritual dimension of assimilation.

To hear Jesus' words as the disciples did, one should understand the context of His teaching and the concepts He used. John 15 is a part of what many call Jesus' "farewell discourse"¹⁵ or "last discourse" (John 13:31-16:33).¹⁶ Temple guards would soon arrest, scourge, and crucify Jesus. The seriousness of the moment and the instructive tone of His words indicate He is likely still in the upper room when he spoke, even though He told the disciples it was time for them to leave (John 14:31). As the Son of God, each of Jesus' words carry eternal significance, but these final teachings before His suffering were of profound import because He knew His hour had come (John 12:23).

The men gathered around Him that evening would easily understand the images of Jesus' teaching. He refers to Himself as "the true vine" (John 15:1). Vines were ubiquitous in the culture in which they lived. Jesus was not saying He was like vines in a general sense. He claimed to be the vine that was "true" (Gk. ἀληθινή). In doing so, He contrasts Himself with a vine that was not "true."

Hearing the Lord speak of the concept of truth was not new to His disciples. When Thomas expressed his confusion about Jesus' destination and how to follow Him, Jesus showed no hesitation in calling Himself "the truth" (Gk. ἀληθεια) (John 14:6). In John's Gospel alone, Jesus uses a form of ἀληθεια seven times.¹⁷

The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states, "The adj. ἀληθής declares that a thing really is as it is seen or represented, and can take on, like ἀληθινός especially, the force of 'proper' or 'genuine.'"¹⁸ By declaring Himself to be the "true

¹⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, *John*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 149.

¹⁶ Tenney, *John*, 141.

¹⁷ See "true worshipers" (4:32), "true bread from heaven" (6:32), the One Who sent Him (7:28), the truth of His judgment (8:16), "the only true God" (17:3), in addition to being the "true vine."

¹⁸ Gottfried Quell, Gerhard Kittel, and Rudolf Bultmann, "Ἀλήθεια, Ἀληθής, Ἀληθινός, Ἀληθεύω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 238.

vine” (John 15:1) Jesus not only described Himself as authentic, but He intimated any other vine is the opposite—not genuine. Jesus sets Himself apart as genuine and reliable and places a label of false or fake on any other “vine.”

Specifically, the artificial “vine” to which Jesus referred was none other than the nation of Israel. The vine had become a symbol for Israel and during the time of the Maccabees they used it on coins. The Old Testament uses the vine as an emblem for Israel frequently.¹⁹ Other sources choose this designation for Israel. Newman and Nida note, “Similar uses of the vine imagery are found in Jewish rabbinical literature, as well as in the New Testament (Matt 21:33–46).”²⁰ Regarding its usage in the Old Testament, Carson notes, “Most remarkable is the fact that whenever historic Israel is referred to under this figure it is the vine’s failure to produce good fruit that is emphasized, along with the corresponding threat of God’s judgment on the nation.”²¹ According to Morris, “All the Old Testament passages which use this symbol appear to regard Israel as faithless or as the object of severe punishment.”²² Where Israel had failed, the Son of God would not. Tenney puts it succinctly: “No fruit can be better than the vine that produces it.”²³ Connection to the failed vine would be fruitless. Therefore, as the genuine vine, those who remain in Christ would “bear much fruit” (John 15:5).

Besides understanding what Jesus meant by His claim to be the “true vine,” it is critical to perceive what Jesus meant by “remain” (Gk. μένω), in other words, that

¹⁹ See Ps 80:9-16; Isa 5:1-7; 27:2ff.; Jer 2:21; 12:10ff.; Ezek 15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14; Hos 10:1-2.

²⁰ Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 478.

²¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 513.

²² Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 668.

²³ Tenney, *John*, 151.

one's relationship with fellow believers depends on upon one's relationship with Christ. The church should not presume a church member actively involved in church life has assimilated himself into Christ. One who is remaining in Christ will also seek to remain in fellowship with other believers. Certainly not all, but many who have joined a fellowship of believers and have chosen not to remain within the life of the church do so because they do not remain in Christ Himself (1 John 2:19).

Jesus uses “abide” or “remain” (Gk. μένω) eleven times in John 15. John uses the term 67 times in his writings and 40 of them are in his Gospel. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint (LXX), uses this term (Gk. μένειν) 89 times. Many, like Brenton, believe the translation of the Septuagint began before 285 BC and describe it as “the earliest version of the Old Testament Scriptures which is extant.”²⁴ The Septuagint offers insight as to the earliest understanding of this key word, “remain” (Gk. μένω). The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* states, “The LXX uses μένειν mostly for עמד (‘to stand,’ ‘to last,’ ‘to remain,’ ‘to endure,’ ‘to remain alive’).”²⁵ Jesus’ use of *remain* is understood in this sense.²⁶

Besides describing the changelessness of God, the New Testament use of μένω supports the concept of remaining in “faith” (1 Tim 2:15) and the truth learned from

²⁴ Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton, *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament: English Translation* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1870), 6.

²⁵ Friedrich Hauck, “Μένω, Ἐμ-, Παρα-, Περι-, Προσμένω, Μονή, Ὑπομένω, Ὑπομονή,” in Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 575.

²⁶ C. John Collins refers to the benefits of the LXX in understanding μένω: In Isaiah 30:18, the Hebrew is translated into English as “blessed are those who wait for him,” while the Greek version is rendered “blessed are those who *abide* in him.” And in Jeremiah 31:32, the Hebrew is translated as “they broke my covenant,” while the Greek version offers “they did not *abide* in my covenant.” The Greek exceptionally and dynamically captures the nuance of the Hebrew in these instances. (C. John Collins, “Christians Can’t Help Abiding in Christ,” *Christianity Today* 60, no. 2 [March 2016]: 46)

Scripture (2 Tim 3:14). Both faith and continuing are requisites for true discipleship and are therefore indicative of those assimilated into the fellowship of believers.

John uses μένειν to describe the intimate and personal relationship between God and Jesus as well as believers and God.²⁷ In John 15 Jesus is teaching the privilege of intimacy with Him, and its resulting benefits are available only for those who remain (Gk. μένειν) in Him.

It is not uncommon to encounter church members who believe John 15 contains a call from Jesus to all believers inviting them to a more intimate fellowship with Him. According to Naselli, they base their belief that “abide” or “remain” in John 15 is a deeper level of devotion on the Keswick theology that “there are two distinct categories of Christians: a lower category and a higher, more desirable category.”²⁸ This belief does not fit the text.

The most obvious problem with this interpretation is the consequences awaiting those who do not remain in Christ. These “branches” are “picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned” (John 15:6b). Nowhere does the Scripture teach it is possible for those “in Christ” to suffer destruction for not bearing fruit. It is not within the scope of this project to analyze the error of Keswick theology or its accompanying impact on believers. Within this section, only what it means to “remain” in Christ will be treated.

One who remains in Jesus will have certain characteristics. Jesus characterizes those who remain in Him as fruit bearing (John 15:4-5, 16). Remaining in Christ is synonymous for remaining in His love (John 15:9-10). Experiencing His joy is also a by-

²⁷ Hauck summarizes, “God abides in Christ, 14:10. Believers abide in Christ (6:56; 15:4-7; 1 Jn. 2:6, 27 f.; 3:6, 24) and Christ in them (Jn. 15:4-7; 1 Jn. 3:24). God abides in believers (1 Jn. 4:16), and believers in God (1 Jn. 2:24; 4:16).” Hauck, “Μένω, Ἐμ-, Παρα-, Περι-, Προσμένω, Μονή, Ὑπομένω, Ὑπομονή,” 576.

²⁸ Andrew David Naselli, *Let Go and Let God? A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 40.

product of remaining in Christ and His love (John 15:11). All of this depends on obeying His commands (John 15:10).

Christ-followers may enjoy a remarkable intimate relationship with Christ resulting in a productive, fruit-bearing, joyful life. There is one caveat—obedience. Upon hearing Jesus say obedience to His commands is necessary to remain in Him, one may immediately think of the decalogue or the ten commandments (Exod 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21). Jesus never minimizes the revelation of the holiness of God on Mount Sinai. He made it clear He came to fulfill the “Law and the Prophets” (Matt 5:17). When asked which commandment was the greatest, He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and emphasized this was the “first and greatest commandment” (Matt 22:36-37). He did not stop there. He continued by saying the second commandment is to parallel the first: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39).

When teaching His disciples, the Lord could have referred to the “ten words”²⁹ or repeated His summation of the Law, but instead He narrowed His answer to one expectation for those who wish to remain in Him. Jesus plainly states, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

Jesus does not leave this vital command open to the interpretation of the individual. It does not allow one to consider mere sentimental feelings as fulfilling the Lord’s expectations. The standard by which one should measure obedience to this command is Jesus’ own love for His followers. Those who remain in Christ do so because of His love. His love is sacrificial, and He expects His disciples to love one another to the same degree.

²⁹ (Hebrew עֲשֵׂרֵת הַדְּבָרִים). Cf. Exod 34:28, from Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 183.

The love Christians are to have for one another is a love that originates with the Father (John 15:9) and is modeled by the Son (John 15:9, 12-13). A love that causes one to remain in fellowship with other believers is evidence of the love of God that allows one to remain in Him. His people demonstrate the love they receive from Him when they produce fruit and experience Jesus' joy.

To drive home the point, He repeats Himself, "This is My command: Love each other" (John 15:17). Immediately following this statement, Jesus gives one more example proving those who do not love His people yet claim to remain in Him are not. By describing the hatred the world has for His followers, the meaning is unavoidable; those who hate His people are of the world and hate Him also.

Despite every effort, some new members will not assimilate into the church and will leave. Clearly, some do not remain in the fellowship of God's people because they do not remain in Christ in the sense of never having experienced the new birth. Perhaps the Holy Spirit brought Jesus' teaching to John's mind when He inspired John to write, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19).

God has inexorably related the life-giving, fruit-producing, joy-inducing results of an intimate relationship with Christ to a Christian's relationship with other believers. To put it another way, a Christ-follower's love for those in the fellowship is proof of his/her remaining in Him. Those who remain in Christ also seek to remain in fellowship with other believers. As seen earlier, when Jesus called Himself "the true vine" (John 15:1) He was indicting Israel of not genuinely being His people representing God on the earth. Despite their claims and religious activities, they were not genuinely His people. Jesus revealed that those who do not show His love to His people do not remain in Him are not His people either.

Acts 9: Forgiving Former Enemies

Within a short time of the death and resurrection of Christ, the persecution of His followers began. Leading the efforts to stop the advancement of “the Way”³⁰ (Acts 9:2) was Saul of Tarsus. His heritage and training made him especially zealous and effective in his notorious mission.

Saul was rightly proud of his lineage as being from the “tribe of Benjamin” (Rom 11:1) and an ardent Pharisee (Phil 3:5), as was his father before him (Acts 23:6). He also had the unique benefits of being a Roman citizen, which he used to his advantage when the persecutor became the persecuted (Acts 16:37; 21:39). He described himself as a “young man” (Acts 7:58) who was exceptional among his peers in the study of Judaism and known for his determination to defend the beliefs of his forefathers (Gal 1:13f). Armed with the authority of the chief priest (Joseph Caiaphas), he took his assignment with deadly seriousness. Because of his devotion to Judaism, or better, the traditions, they imprisoned and even put to death many believers (Acts 26:10).

By his own account, Saul’s effectiveness in persecuting believers or preaching the gospel was not for his striking good looks or winsome personality (1 Cor 2:3f; 2 Cor 10:10). Ellis quotes from the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*: “And he saw Paul coming, a man little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel.”³¹

It is ironic to read of Saul having the face of an angel. Luke gives the same description to Stephen, the one Saul was pleased to see stoned after hearing him expound

³⁰ F. F. Bruce notes, “‘The Way’ is a designation for the new movement used several times in Acts (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; cf. also 16:17; 18:25-26). It was evidently a term used by the early followers of Jesus to denote their movement as the way of life or the way of salvation.” F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 181.

³¹ E. E. Ellis, “Paul,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 880.

the Scripture (Acts 8:1). Likely, the Holy Spirit seared the memory of Stephen's face in Saul's mind leading up to his conversion. The well-educated, zealous, and powerful Saul began his life of following Christ in a most unique manner. While on his way to Damascus to arrest any who were members of "the Way" (Acts 9:2), Saul found himself knocked to the ground, blinded, and in abject humility. He expresses the contrition of all repentant sinners by meekly asking Jesus, "Who are you Lord?" (Acts 9:1).

Gaebelein contends that Saul actually saw the risen Lord.³² Additionally, Saul clearly heard Jesus identify Himself with those he had been tormenting. As a result, Saul was undone. He realized he had condoned the killing of innocent people who were actually serving God. Stephen had been speaking the truth. In a matter of minutes, Saul had gone from believing he was on mission for God against evil to realizing he and his mission were evil. The grace and mercy of God overwhelmed Him and commissioned him for service. Saul was not the only one dumbfounded by the grace of God seizing his life. The Lord called one of His followers by the name of Ananias to be the first to assist the former antagonist (Acts 9:10-16). Ananias would soon meet the once fierce persecutor whom the Lord had blinded.

³² Gaebelein shows that the text removes any doubt as to Saul identifying the Lord Jesus as the One speaking to him:

Saul beheld the Lord Himself. In that great light which shone about him, in that opened heaven, he saw Him, who had spoken, the Man in Glory. The Lord Jesus Christ appeared unto him. The Son of God in the Glory of the Father was revealed unto Saul. Though the record here is silent about the actual vision, it is clearly seen from other Scriptures that such was the case. Ananias later addressed Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way" (ix:17). From another verse in our chapter (verse 27), we learn that Barnabas said "that he had seen the Lord in the way and that He had spoken to him." Then in Chapter xxvi:16, the Lord Himself spoke to Saul: "I have appeared unto thee." A more direct testimony is found from "the Apostle in 1 Corin. xv., where, after mentioning the different witnesses of the resurrection, Paul says, "and last of all He was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corin. xv:8-9). He saw the Lord in all His resurrection Glory and this, besides the direct call, constituted him an Apostle, for he was now a fit witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Am I not an Apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord?" (1 Cor. ix:I.) (Arno Clemens Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* [New York: Publication Office "Our Hope," 1912], 171)

Christianity was in its infancy. Morris and others believe Paul's conversion took place near the date of AD 32.³³ It would seem hard for the modern church member to appreciate the shocking change to take place in the life of one so adamantly opposed to their beliefs. Ananias had real concerns because of Saul's notorious reputation, and for good reason. Gaebelein asserts that Saul "was, so to speak, the heading up of all the hatred and malignity against the Christ of God. He personified the blindness, unbelief and hatred of the whole nation. He was indeed an enemy, the greatest enemy, the chief of sinners."³⁴

A modern parallel could be the image of a radical Muslim imam, who promoted terrorism against Jews and Christians, walking into a Jewish or Christian church and requesting membership at the close of a Sunday service. One can almost hear the gasps and murmurings that would result. The Lord gave personal assurance to Ananias of His plans for Saul and graciously repeated His assignment. Despite his concerns, Ananias trusted the Lord and obeyed. Ananias' background as a "devout observer of the law" (Acts 22:12a) prepared him not only for salvation, but also for obedient service. Because he was "devout" he was "highly respected by all the Jews living there" (Acts 22:12b).

Following Saul's introduction to Ananias and his baptism, he wasted no time proclaiming the message, "Jesus is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20). This radical change of the man and his message continued to bewilder people. Those living in Damascus were incredulous asking, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on the name?" (Acts 9:26).

³³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1988), 43.

³⁴ Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 171.

As the local Jews faced the reality that Saul had joined the Way he became persona non grata³⁵ to them. Having learned of their plot to kill him, he escaped to join believers in Jerusalem. Had he not, his fate would surely have been the same as Stephen's. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Saul again faced people whom he needed to convince he had sincerely chosen to follow Christ. Helmer paints a picture of the challenges Saul (Paul) faced: "Paul first came to Jerusalem not to a welcome as a mighty evangelist of the future, but as a virtual outcast, rejected by both communities . . . the bulk of the church shunned contact with him."³⁶ The ostracization of Saul is hardly surprising as Saul had pursued people of the Way well beyond Jerusalem to "foreign cities" (Acts 26:11). The persecutor became the persecuted—he had left Damascus for Jerusalem and after only two weeks had to flee again.

The modern church may not see many conversions as dramatic as Saul, but they should work to personally connect with every new believer, whatever their background may be. Christ's commission to make disciples extends beyond the moment of conversion until new disciples are also making disciples. As the mandate applies to all Christ-followers, it also includes every person the Lord adds to His church irrespective of their past. Every believer has the responsibility and privilege to help others follow Christ and connect with His Body in the local church. Someone may object to those who suggest laymen as well as clergy should make disciples and attempt to shirk their responsibility to new believers by pointing to Acts 22:12 where Luke describes Ananias as being "highly regarded." They may even say, "I am not in leadership and I'm not well-known like Ananias." Ananias' peers based their respect for him on his sincerity and devotion. Anyone committed to following Christ may be a "devout" disciple. In Ananias,

³⁵ From Latin meaning, "unacceptable person."

³⁶ Colin J. Hemer and Conrad H. Gempf, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 49 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 249.

God chose an ordinary man with a genuine concern to serve in the role of a prophet by delivering His message to Saul.

Later, others were instrumental in helping Saul find his way among believers. According to Ellis, “Barnabas ventured to introduce him to leaders of the understandably suspicious Christians.”³⁷ What was Barnabas’ credentials permitting him to do this? Luke describes him as being “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:24a). God still uses ordinary people to make disciples and welcome people into His church. Whatever anxieties the modern believer may feel when meeting someone from outside the church with a different background than theirs, they are not likely to be as great as those who initiated a relationship with Saul of Tarsus. Simple devotion may overcome whatever credentials or courage one may lack by being “full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:24a).

All new followers of Christ begin a new life, and some enter a society foreign to them. Ananias exemplifies the grace and compassion the church must show all new believers irrespective of their background. The church must not neglect the responsibility of caring for a new believer that Christ has entrusted to them.

Ephesians 2–3: Tear Down That Wall

Racial division is not new—it is as old as the Fall. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, “We must face the sad fact that at the eleven o’clock hour on Sunday morning when we stand to sing, we stand in the most segregated hour in America.”³⁸ Recent data would indicate King’s statement is still true.³⁹ This Sunday segregation not only hinders the

³⁷ Ellis, “Paul,” 880.

³⁸ Scott Williams, *Church Diversity: Sunday the Most Segregated Day of the Week* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf, 2011), 22.

³⁹ Bob Smietana, “Sunday Morning in America Still Segregated—and That’s OK with Worshipers,” LifeWay Research, January 15, 2015, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2015/01/15/sunday-morning-in-america-still-segregated-and-thats-ok-with-worshippers/>.

fulfillment of the Great Commission by preventing or hindering the possibility of assimilation, it also does not bring glory to God (John 17:20-23).

For those who consider themselves “people of the book,” there should never even be a hint of racism. The Lord Jesus was not vague when He said the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt 22:39) and neither was He ambiguous when He gave His followers the Great Commission goal to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). Christ did not limit His directive to “make disciples” to Jews or any other people group, but explicitly to all people groups (Matt 28:19; Gk. πάντα τὰ ἔθνη). Nolland rightly observes this statement as not being directed to Gentiles, but “to the whole of humanity.”⁴⁰

The word “gentile” (Heb. גּוֹיִם and Gk. ἔθνος) may refer to “all people without any distinction”⁴¹ but specifically to those who are not Jews. Jews considered non-Jews unrighteous sinners with detestable lifestyles (Gal 2:15; Deut 18:9). Charles quotes an unnamed extra-biblical Jewish writer who did not mince words:

And every one that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but to the children of destruction; nor is there, moreover, any sign on him that he is the Lord's, but (he is destined) to be destroyed and slain from the earth, and to be rooted out of the earth, for he has broken the covenant of the Lord our God.⁴²

In many places, church members have a similar attitude, even if not as harsh, toward those with a different ethnic background. If church members tend to give lip service to their support of the Great Commission, they have largely ignored the Lord's desire to intentionally include all peoples. It has been my sad experience on more than

⁴⁰ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), 1266.

⁴¹ Chad Chambers, “Gentiles,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁴² Robert Henry Charles, ed., *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 2:36-37.

one occasion to encounter church members who were not welcoming to people of a different race. From my experience, some church members celebrate and welcome newcomers unless they are of a different color or nationality. The cause of such racism among professing believers may be willful or because of ignorance, but whatever the motivation, it is never to be excused. Sometimes this religious, racial profiling comes in the form of open hostility. At other times, members may exhibit subtle passive-aggressive behavior. This racist “partiality” in any form is a grievous sin.⁴³ The sad irony is it has occurred among people who proclaim to believe Scripture, and in particular, the Great Commission.

One may object to including believers of other races in their fellowship for a variety of reasons based on their family heritage and tradition. These objectors should understand no enmity could have been stronger or lasted longer than that between Jew and Gentile. In Tolbert’s examination of Ephesians, he refers to the origins of this separation as having its roots in “Israel’s Scriptures.”⁴⁴ He lists examples from Deuteronomy, Nehemiah, Daniel, and extra biblical writings such as *Joseph and Aseneth*, *Jubilees*, and Philo.⁴⁵

One may attempt to argue against welcoming people of different races into their local church by saying their culture is “miles apart” from those in the church. One such example may be the cultural divide between some whites and blacks. However different ethnic cultures may appear to be, they could hardly be farther apart than those of the Jew and the Gentile.

⁴³ Racism, prejudice, and partiality are never pleasing to God (Jas 2:1-9). James addresses those who show partiality or favoritism and tells them they have “become judges with evil thoughts” (Jas 2:4). Furthermore, racism is condemned as sin in the Bible and pictured as breaking the “royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Jas 2:8; 1 Tim 5:21).

⁴⁴ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 80.

⁴⁵ Cf. Deut 23:3-4; Neh 13:3; Dan 1:8-16.

Paul speaks of the Gentiles being “far away” (Eph 2:13). One could search far and wide and still not find a greater wall separating two opposing groups than the animosity and condescension separating Jew and Gentile. This separation was not only theological, but also physical. The division between Jew and Gentile was evident even at the Temple. Talbert says the Jewish historian Josephus “describes inscriptions at the Temple in Jerusalem warning Gentiles not to enter on pain of death.”⁴⁶ Talbert explains that in 1871 someone discovered an inscription with this statement, “No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and enclosure around the Temple area. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which will follow.”⁴⁷ The physical barrier between the Court of the Gentiles and the area reserved for Jews at the Temple represents a theological wall. Stott describes the physical wall around the Court of the Gentiles as “a spacious court running right round the temple and its inner courts. From any part of it the Gentiles could look up and view the temple but could not approach it.”⁴⁸

Christ brought Jew and Gentile together in Himself by destroying “the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14). The context connects this wall to “the law with its commandments and regulations” (Eph 2:15), which Christ removed by fulfilling the law (Mt. 5:17). If one considers himself a “Christ-follower,” he or she would do well to examine the lifestyle of the Lord. He did not avoid people because of race but took the opportunities the Father gave Him to connect with them. Jesus received harsh criticism for his relationship with Jews considered “sinners” (Matt 9:11). Throughout His ministry, Jesus intentionally interacted with Gentiles showing His concern for them.

⁴⁶ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 79.

⁴⁷ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 79.

⁴⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God’s New Society*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 91.

Once such example is His determination to “go through Samaria” where He met with a woman who Jew and Gentile alike ostracized. By crossing traditional and religious boundaries this woman and “many more became believers” (John 4:1-42).

It was common for a Jewish man to express gratitude He was born a Jew and not a Gentile. Bruce says the Jewish man “thanked God daily that he had not been made a Gentile and thanked Him at the same time that he had not been made a woman.”⁴⁹ The mere accusation that Paul had brought a gentile into the Temple was enough to rally a mob intent on murdering him (Acts 21:27-32). Several factors influenced Jewish separation from Gentiles. Paul lists several: “Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’. . . excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise” (Eph 2:11-12).

The view that gentiles were “without hope” (Eph 2:12b) is true of all who have not experienced the new birth (John 3:3), including the Jew. That Israel, as a whole, forgot her calling to be a light for the Gentiles (Is. 49:6b) is a profound tragedy. The same depraved nature within the Jew who thought herself better than the gentile exists within all people. Pride may tempt us to condescend to those who differ from us (even fellow believers) and we must quickly eliminate it as no one people group can claim to be less depraved and deserving of judgment than another. Paul reminded the Gentiles of their morbid state before following Christ (Eph 2:1-2), but he quickly included himself and his fellow Jewish believers among those who “were by nature objects of wrath” (Eph 2:3).

Bruce points out the similarities of this description with a similar judgement made by David: “With this use of the Hebrew idiom ‘children of wrath’ may be compared King David’s denunciation of the rich man who seized his poor neighbor’s ewe-lamb:

⁴⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), s.v. “Ephesians, II The New Humanity a Divine Creation, 4. The Incorporation of the Gentiles, (1) Their Former Plight (2:11-12),” accessed September 15, 2018, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.sbts.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1058546>.

‘the man who has done this is a “son [sic] of death,”’ that is, he ‘deserves to die’ (2 Sam 12:5 RSV).”⁵⁰

Paul does not minimize the Gentiles’ need for salvation but reminds them of their status before God’s work of grace in their lives (Eph 2:12). Sin unites both Jew and Gentile in judgment as they both deserve to die. Grace may now unite both Jew and Gentile in Christ because He did die for sinners (Eph 2:5b, 8). This grace is specifically the grace of God found by those who are “in Christ.” It is by God’s grace whereby first the Jew and then the Gentile may experience God’s power of salvation after hearing the gospel (Rom 1:16) and be positionally, “in Christ.” Discrimination is not pleasing to God.

Peter acknowledged the regulation restricting contact with Gentiles in Acts 10:28a: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him.” Nevertheless, he announced to Cornelius, the Gentile Roman centurion in Caesarea, and others gathered in his home, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism” (Acts 10:34). Not only does God not show favoritism, He concludes all are “under wrath” (Eph 2:3) and all may receive grace (Titus 2:11; Heb 2:9).

Later, following the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and the other Gentiles, Peter asks, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (Acts 10:47). Peter says key to unity between believing Jews and Gentiles is the Person of the Holy Spirit. His presence in the life of a believer shows he or she is a child of God (Rom 8:9b) and, as Paul described, is “in Christ.”⁵¹ It is Christ, Himself, Who unites all believers by making peace with God

⁵⁰ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, s.v. “Ephesians, II The New Humanity a Divine Creation, 4. The Incorporation of the Gentiles, (1) Their Former Plight (2:11-12).”

⁵¹ According to Kenneth Boa, Paul uses “in Christ” 86 times in his epistles. Cf. Eph 1:1, 3, 9, 12-13; 2:6, 10, 3:6. Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, *Romans*, Holman New Testament Commentary, vol. 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 208.

through His atonement (Col 1:20) and enabling His followers to enjoy the peace of God with one another.

Whatever the reaction from the contemporary church member may be by God's intent to remove barriers between races, he/she is still not likely to be as surprised as the average Jew would be to know Gentiles may be members of God's people. Standing outside the Temple with John and the beggar God had healed, Peter repeated the "LORD's declaration" to Abraham: "All the nations of the earth will be blessed by your offspring" (Acts 3:25; Gen 22:18). Any reluctance to reach out to others because of racial, social, or economic differences is inexcusable. If God expects Christ-followers to love all people, church members should welcome and lovingly assimilate a fellow believer who professes Christ. To overcome these often-deep-rooted sinful prejudices, believers should listen to Paul and "remember" (Eph 2:11) what God has done for us "through the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13). Barth cautions his readers about the seriousness of these words: "Repentance, decision, and gratitude are called for, not a mental recollection only."⁵²

One should see assimilation, or as some prefer to call it, retention of members, as a natural part of the discipleship process. In Ephesians, Gentiles who believed are included in the mystery of God as members of God's household along with the Jews because they are "in Christ." In the same way, churches should include any believer, regardless of ethnic background or nation of origin, as members of Christ's body—the local church—if they too are "in Christ."

Philemon: Overcoming Barriers of Status and Sin

Beginning with Abraham, God showed His desire to bless all mankind rather than one race or a segment of society. Several examples from Scripture have shown how

⁵² Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 34 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1974), 254.

God provided opportunities for people of various backgrounds, nationalities, ethnic groups, and social statuses to be included among His people and enjoy a relationship with Him. The final example offered here comes from the short letter to Philemon from the apostle Paul. Paul challenges his friend Philemon to accept his returning runaway slave by the name of Onesimus as a brother in Christ (Phil 16).

Reconciliation would be no easy task. The difference between Philemon and Onesimus was significant. These men were polar opposites on the social spectrum. To make matters worse, Onesimus had betrayed his owner and forsaken his duties. We do not know what the lost man hours cost Philemon, nor do we know if Onesimus took valuables to subsidize his escape (Phil 18). However wide the differences between Philemon and Onesimus may have been, and whatever the losses Philemon may have suffered, they are petty compared to the differences between Holy God and fallen man.

Love for the world motivated God to send His son to earth (John 3:16) and love was the motivation behind Paul's appeal to Philemon. Only God's love for Paul could have intercepted him and called him to be His servant (2 Cor 5:14 ESV). As His servant, Paul's appeals were on "Christ's behalf" (2 Cor 5:20). Even as Paul experienced the love of God, the "basis of love" (Phil 8) was the impetus for his letter to Philemon.

God revealed His love through Paul in several ways. First, Paul loved Onesimus as a son (Phil 10). Like Timothy (1 Tim 1:2) and Titus (Titus 1:4), he guided the runaway to turn and become a Christ-follower. He had a strong bond with the slave and his words reveal he knew his responsibility to him did not end at Onesimus' conversion. Not only did Paul affectionately describe Onesimus as a "son" (Phil 10), he also referred to him as his "very heart" (Phil 12). Paul further demonstrated God's love by his willingness to pay for damages or any loss of income Philemon may have incurred because of Onesimus' defection. By this, Paul resembles Christ as He became a sacrifice to pay the debt of man's sins on the cross. God was "canceling the record of debt that stood against us" through Jesus' death on the cross (Col 2:14). Christ's sacrificial death on the cross was how God

reconciled the world to Himself (2 Cor 5:18) and Paul was ready to sacrifice to see Philemon and Onesimus' reconciled and united as brothers. Love compels the believer cognizant of God's love to act in love toward others.

Onesimus was a slave owned by Philemon in a culture largely accepting of the practice as a normal way of life. Slavery will always be a tragic part of American history. The effects of this dark period still linger, but gratefully most Americans relegate such sanctioned inhumanity to the past. It was not so during the time of Paul. Much of the world accepted slavery as a normal way of life. In the culture of his day, society viewed Onesimus to be in a lower class. Those who were slaves in the Roman empire entered a life of servitude through several possible avenues. One could be born a slave if his or her parents were slaves. Some became slaves because of debts they owed or as a punishment for their crime. Some may even have chosen to be slaves. The worst scenarios by which one became a slave included being captured by the Roman army and returned to Rome or being kidnapped by those who made their living in the slave trade. No one knows how Onesimus became a slave or how long he had served Philemon.

In the early period of the Roman empire, the rights of a slave were virtually non-existent. Since society considered them property or chattel, their owner could treat them as they wished without fear of consequences. MacArthur contends that slaves who were fortunate enough to live in the "cities, working alongside their masters as a part of the household" enjoyed a much better life.⁵³ This was especially true of those slaves who had the benefit of a good master who cared for them and even treated them as though they were part of their family. In MacArthur's insightful description of slavery in the Roman world he points to the central factor determining a slave's life; his or her master,

⁵³ John MacArthur, *Slave—The Hidden Truth about Your Identity in Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 25, Kindle.

“One’s experience as a slave, then, ultimately depended on the demands and goodness of the master.”⁵⁴

God used Paul to fill the role of peacemaker (Matt 5:9). His appeal made peace between these men possible. Before Onesimus became a Christ-follower, he was following his own way. By his disobedience, unfaithfulness, and betrayal, Onesimus declared himself an untrustworthy enemy of Philemon.

The gospel Paul had previously delivered to Philemon that led him to repentance was now at work in his fugitive slave. God brought about a change in Onesimus’ heart and his actions proved he was changed. The slave had turned from his way to God’s way and now was doing works “worthy of repentance” (Acts 26:20). Now, he desired to follow God’s way, and that meant returning to his owner even if it meant hardship.

Those who are “in Christ” may follow Him as the perfect example of how He wants His people to live in a healthy relationship with God and others. Jesus Christ changes His followers so believers may have a relationship with the Father (2 Cor 5:17). It is also because of the change Jesus Christ causes one may have relationships with others restored. Onesimus was now returning to Philemon as a changed man because of Christ. As a brother in the Lord, a new relationship with his owner was possible. The picture painted in Paul’s letter to Philemon of a slave being the brother of his or her master may have been on the mind of Placide Cappeau when he wrote the words to *Minuit Chrétiens* or *Cantique de Noel*): “Le Rédempteur a brisé toute entrave / La terre est libre et le ciel est ouvert / Il voit un frère où n’était qu’un esclave / L’amour unit ceux qu’enchaînait le fer.”⁵⁵ Translated to English, the lyrics read, “The Redeemer has overcome every

⁵⁴ MacArthur, *Slave*, 28.

⁵⁵ French lyrics to “O Holy Night,” accessed December 3, 2018, <https://www.weeklystandard.com/priscilla-m-jensen/the-surprising-history-of-o-holy-night-2010931>.

obstacle/ The earth is free and Heaven is open / He sees a brother where there was only a slave / Love unites those that iron had chained.”⁵⁶

Cappeau’s words, “a brother where there was only a slave”⁵⁷ clearly describe the way Paul desired Philemon to view Onesimus. Christ-following church members must identify outsiders of any background who have experienced the new birth (John 3:3) as brothers and sisters, for they too have been “slaves” to sin. Those visiting churches come from a variety of social backgrounds, including education, income, or their employment status. Some church members may use these differences as excuses and say, “They wouldn’t be comfortable here” or “they are just different, so I really don’t feel comfortable around them.” Members may meet seekers on Sunday mornings who are still striving to earn their GED, while most members of the church are college graduates. Or the new face in the congregation may be without work or work in a blue-collar field while those around them have white-collar jobs. Members may treat the outsider politely, but never included them in the fellowship or they may shun them because of their differences. As real as the differences may be, God did not tell His people to only love and show hospitality to those who are like them. The Lord plainly said just the opposite:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12-14)

It would be difficult to find men more different than Philemon and Onesimus. Paul was asking his wealthy friend Philemon to mend a relationship with a man who had disrespected him and likely robbed him of income and valuables. Paul expected his friend to treat Onesimus as a brother even though everyone else considered chattel. Onesimus

⁵⁶ Camille Chevalier-Karfis, “Minuit Chrétien French Christmas Carol For O Holy Night,” ThoughtCo, January 6, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/french-christmas-carol-o-holy-night-1368186>.

⁵⁷ René and Cappeau, “L’auteur Du “Minuit Chrétiens.” Later composed by Adolphe Adam as “Cantique de Noël,” 1847, or “O Holy Night.”

was not only different in income, education, and social status, he was also likely a criminal now as well.

The love of God bridged the chasm between Himself and man, and it was because of love Paul interjected himself in the family and business affairs of his wealthy friend Philemon, on behalf of Onesimus. Because of his relationship with Christ, Paul's behavior resembled His Lord. Like Christ, Paul laid aside his authority (Phil 2:7-8) to make his appeal. Similarly, he acted in love, grace, humility, and showed a willingness to sacrifice for the unworthy. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Paul calls for Philemon to show the same grace God had given him. He had a choice to make and so does the Christ-follower of today.

God has inseparably linked love to fellowship. Philemon's response to Paul's letter would determine whether genuine fellowship occurred between him and Onesimus and whether his warm fellowship continued with Paul. Verse 6, although described by Moo as "universally recognized as the most difficult in Philemon,"⁵⁸ contains the theme of fellowship.

The contemporary reader is likely to interpret "sharing your faith" (v. 6) as a common description of personal evangelism, but Melick stresses that understanding of this phrase "is far removed from any context supposed for this letter."⁵⁹ A closer look at the word "sharing" (Gk. κοινωνία) and the context reveals the sharing of which Paul was speaking would be better understood as "participation" in Philemon 6, as used by the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB). Later, Paul used the same root word (Gk. κοινωνία) for "partners" (Phil 1:7). Regarding verse 6, Larson says, "Paul prayed that Philemon's expressions of faith would continue unbroken, that he would integrate life

⁵⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 389.

⁵⁹ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary, vol. 32 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 354.

and belief.”⁶⁰ Because they were his brothers in Christ, Paul experienced fellowship with Philemon and Onesimus. Now, his goal was to facilitate this Christ-centered fellowship between them. Had either man been recalcitrant in response to Paul’s leadership, fellowship would be broken between Paul and Philemon and never experienced between Philemon and Onesimus.

Melick summarizes the inherent responsibilities of believers through relationships:

The epistle teaches practically what it means to be in Christ. Individualistic ideas and ambitions become secondary, and participation in the larger work of God becomes primary. Christians must forgive. They must hope for the best. They must treat others as Christ treated them and as they hope to be treated. Paul promised Philemon that if he did what he should he would have Onesimus as a brother in the flesh and in the Lord (v. 16). Both relationships matter, but the spiritual relationship lasts forever. The call to Christ is a call to join in a fellowship with other Christians. That fellowship appreciates all others who are in Christ.⁶¹

A relationship of genuine fellowship involving partnership, participation, and sharing is what God desires for mankind to enjoy with Him. Unsurprisingly, relationships are the essence of discipleship. Assimilation exists to the degree the newcomer or outsider experiences true fellowship with the local Body of Christ.

Those determined to follow Christ’s example may find themselves in a similar position as that of Paul—seeking to reconcile believers. God not only called Christ-followers and members of a local body of believers to be peacemakers and help reconcile people with God, but also to help a new believer reconcile with other believers. The repentant brother or sister could be of a different social background and may have previously offended members of the church through shady business practices and broken contracts. Whatever the case, new believers need someone who is a part of the fellowship

⁶⁰ Knute Larson, *I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Holman New Testament Commentary, vol. 9 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 402.

⁶¹ Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary, vol. 32 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 345-46.

of the church, who also knows of the repentance of the newcomers, to speak on their behalf if the church is to welcome and assimilate them as a member of the family of God.

Because of Philemon's prayers, Paul would one day be on his doorstep (v. 22). God's people will eventually have an encounter with the Lord. Philemon knew the day would come when he would give an account for how he treated his brother Onesimus and God will hold today's church to account for how they welcomed less fortunate brothers and sisters with baggage from their past into the fellowship.

Discipleship requires the assimilation of the new believer into the fellowship of a local church. Assimilation of a new believer will best take place when the local body of believers and the outsider experience the same true "fellowship" the early church had following Pentecost (Acts 2:42). Every Christ-follower has fellowship with Christ. Because of Him, believers may form a "partnership in the gospel" (Phil 1:5a) that shares the responsibility of the great commission (Matt 28:19-20).

Assimilation Is Expected by God and Was Practiced by the Early Church

The love of God, His commission to the church, and His description of the church show He expects the church to assimilate repentant believers. God has woven this profound truth of John 3:16 throughout the pages of Scripture: God loves the world. Through the gift of His Son, He has intervened to provide a path to forgiveness leading to a real and eternal relationship with Him. For believers to celebrate the message of God's love without also inherently desiring to join Him in His mission of love to the people of the world is incongruous.

Those who wish to not only celebrate but also share God's message would be wise to note the Lord's method of spreading this message to all people: disciple-making. Christ found no contentment in only calling and motivating His followers. He determined to multiply His followers. He removed any doubt whether He intended to limit His mission to certain people. He loved "the world" (John 3:16) and commanded His followers to

make disciples of all people groups (Matt 28:19). His first followers were not from among Jerusalem's religious elite. Believers who say they agree the method of spreading God's love is making disciples but do not desire to join Him in the making of disciples is akin to hypocrisy.

The life of Christ and the lives of His early followers recorded in Scripture show His followers are not to limit the message of the gospel and the mission of the church by any boundary. Spatial, racial, religious, national, and economic barriers are not strong enough to prevent the spread of the message of reconciliation offered by Christ (2 Cor 5:18).

God desires "all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus" to unite in His church (1 Cor 1:2). His church contains people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev 7:9). For believers to sing hymns and recite Scripture celebrating God's love for the world and His mission to reach the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), yet not work to assist newcomers with their transition into the fellowship is a tacit opposition to their assimilation within the church.

Believers in the New Testament acted in faith and exhibited compassion for those coming to Christ and desiring to join the fellowship of disciples. Following Saul's conversion, Ananias overcame his fear of Saul by obeying God and helping the newly converted Pharisee to join the fellowship of believers (Acts 9:17). In Jerusalem, Barnabas broke ranks with his fellow disciples and brought Saul to the apostles (Acts 9:26-27). Following Jesus' example of reaching out to the marginalized, Paul urged his friend, Philemon, to welcome Onesimus as a brother (Phil 16). Throughout his ministry, Paul not only shared the gospel with Gentiles of widely different socio-economic backgrounds, but he also helped them form churches. By his example and admonition, others followed suit. The Spirit of God unites all believers into one body even though they may be "Jews or Greeks, slave or free" (1 Cor 12:13). Those led by the Spirit will seek to do the same.

Conclusion

Scriptures testify to the fact God initiated a relationship with fallen man and made it possible for him to become part of His Body, the church, through a relationship with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. These same Scriptures reveal the Lord Jesus commissioned His followers to engage all people groups so they too may become His disciples. Since Jesus taught, prayed, and commanded His followers to be united, obeying His commission requires the assimilation of repentant new believers into the fellowship of the church.

This chapter provided examples of Old and New Testament passages that establish the fact the church is not to ostracize any repentant person, however alien they may appear to them. Churches should make every effort to demonstrate the love of Christ for the development of relationships between the newcomer and established members. However different a newcomer may be to the body of believers, if the newcomer is a genuine Christ-follower seeking a “partnership in the gospel” with them, the church may assimilate them as an equal and valued member of the fellowship of believers.

CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL, PRACTICAL, AND HISTORICAL
ISSUES RELATED TO ASSIMILATION

This chapter explores the common challenges churches face in the process of assimilation and potential solutions for these challenges. It would not be unusual to hear church members express an ardent devotion to Scripture and to articulate orthodox biblical principles. If attrition of members, though, exceeds additions there is a serious practical disconnect between theology and practice. The number of reported baptisms in Southern Baptist churches compared with attendance indicate additions have failed to stem the decline in membership attrition.¹ By the numbers, Southern Baptists as a whole appear to be largely ineffective in accomplishing the very thing Christ told His followers to do, “make disciples” (Matt 28:19).² Thom Rainer describes the problem as “a disciple-making deficiency.”³ Effective assimilation is not only an indicator of discipleship, but also a necessary part of making disciples. Rather than being a church growth buzzword or a system based on human ingenuity, assimilation is a natural and vital part of the disciple making process.

¹ Kate Shellnutt, “Southern Baptists Down to Lowest in 30 Years,” *Christianity Today*, October 10, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/may/southern-baptists-acp-membership-baptism-decline-2018.html>.

² Willow Creek Community Church is an example of a church that discovered that their efforts to increase attendance in programs did “not predict whether someone’s becoming more of a disciple of Christ.” “Willow Creek Repents?” *Christianity Today*, October 8, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/october-online-only/willow-creek-repents.html>. Details of Willow Creek’s research leading to their efforts to change are found in Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Chicago: Willow Creek Association, 2007).

³ Thom S. Rainer. “7 Indicators of True Church Discipleship,” June 10, 2016, <https://factsandtrends.net/2016/06/10/7-indicators-of-true-church-discipleship/#.V1rKd-YrJQM>.

Assimilation Is Vital

Some may say that assimilation is a man-made term and irrelevant to God's people. While the term may not appear in Scripture, it has already been shown that assimilation is a biblical concept described in both Old and New Testaments.⁴ Whatever synonym one instead may prefer, the practice of assimilation is vital to God's people who take the Great Commission seriously.

Discipleship Requires Assimilation

Leith Anderson, in his book *A Church for the 21st Century*, describes situations where people or institutions have achieved their goal, but realized they were unsuccessful. He refers to an example provided by Peter Drucker regarding Apple Computers. Apparently, Apple's original aim was to meet the needs of businesses. Early in the company's history they found schools more interested in their computers than businesses. Anderson says, "In a sense, they succeeded but didn't like the results. Some succeed and call themselves failures. Some fail and call themselves successes. Few step back soon enough or long enough to define what is failure."⁵

Similarly, each church and individual church member must "step back soon enough or long enough to define what is failure."⁶ If not, churches may find themselves successful in ways that do not matter when life on earth comes to a close. The typical church busies itself with an almost unlimited number of activities. A satirical post by the website Babylon Bee titled, "Local Church Declares Every Possible Activity a Ministry," humorously draws attention to the reality of churches occupying themselves with activity while failing to obey Christ and produce disciples.⁷ As sad a fate as failure may be, it is

⁴ See chap. 2, p. 18.

⁵ Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 1992), chap. 4, para. 4, Kindle.

⁶ Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century*, chap. 4, para. 4.

⁷ The Babylon Bee, "Local Church Declares Every Activity a Ministry,"

equally sad to be successful in what does not really matter. Glorifying God and making disciples matter, therefore assimilation matters.

This chapter explores the assimilation process because, as Anderson wrote, “Incorporation of newcomers may be one of the most identifiable and measurable signs of health in a church.”⁸ Healthy churches mature in Christ and strive to multiply disciples for future generations.

Biblical Church Growth Requires Assimilation

In *How to Retain Church Visitors: Closing the Exit Door of Your Church*, Marcellinus Chimezie writes, “The number one growth problem of the 21st Century Church is not Evangelism or that new people don’t visit the Church. The number one growth problem of the 21st century Church revolves round the inability of the Church to “retain” visitors and turn them to be the committed champions of the Church mission.”⁹ Churches that do not assimilate new members cannot multiply disciples. Over time, churches come to realize that multiple professions of faith is exciting, but it is only the beginning of disciple making and the difficult work of assimilation.¹⁰

March 18, 2016, <https://babylonbee.com/news/church-declares-every-possible-activity-ministry>.

⁸ Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century*, chap. 7, sec. “Health Signs,” para. 39.

⁹ Chimezie Marcellinus, *How to Retain Church Visitors: Closing the Exit Door of Your Church* (n.p.: n.p., 2018), introduction, para. 1, Kindle, https://www.amazon.com/How-Retain-Church-Visitors-Closing/dp/1980275637/ref=sr_1_1?qid=1582645451&refinements=p_27%3AChimezie+Marcellinus&s=books&sr=1-1&text=Chimezie+Marcellinus.

¹⁰ Timothy Beougher raises the possibility of “spurious conversions” as a factor hindering assimilation. While not disagreeing with Chimezie’s statement, Beougher balances it by asking, “Is it possible that some of the discipleship problem really is an evangelism problem?” Timothy Beougher, Zoom meeting with author and Bill Henard, October 20, 2020. See p. 67 regarding methods of evangelism and their impact on assimilation.

The excitement of multiple decisions for Christ resulting in new members is tempered over time as one realizes that the difficult work of assimilation for the purpose of developing disciples is only beginning. Without a focused effort, many excited newcomers will not last. Adrian Rogers described these short-lived conversion experiences by saying, “A lot of these people . . . they remind me of a [sic] Alka-Seltzer. You baptize 'em, you put 'em in water, they fizzle a little while and then disappear.”¹¹

Church Health Requires Assimilation

It is easy to understand why Rainer believes an “intentional assimilation process” is one of the top characteristics of a healthy church.¹² Horner summarizes the importance of assimilation when saying, “Assimilation is ultimately about faithful stewardship of the gospel and the making of disciples.”¹³ Outside of assimilating or integrating with a local body of Christ, one will hardly be mistaken as a Christ-follower.

Love Requires Assimilation

In her novel *Daddy Long Legs*, Jean Webster’s orphan character “Judy” writes a letter to her benefactor describing how she feels in a strange place: “Half the time I don’t know what the girls are talking about; their jokes seem to related [sic] to a past that every one [sic] but me has shared. I’m a foreigner in the world and I don’t understand the language. It’s a miserable feeling.”¹⁴

¹¹ Adrian Rogers, “The Church Triumphant” sermon (Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, July 5, 1992), transcript available from <http://www.sermonsearch.com>, 7.

¹² On September 24, 2015, I participated in a coaching seminar called “Church Answers Live.” Quotes from Thom Rainer with “Church Answers Live” in this chap. are his comments during the live video.

¹³ Michael Scott Horner, “Implementing a Church Membership Course at Williams Creek Baptist Church Williamstown, West Virginia” (DMin project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary 2015), 96.

¹⁴ Jean Webster, *Daddy Long Legs* (New York: Curtis Publishing, 1912), 36.

No doubt, many have felt similarly while visiting a church. Rainer points out, “There is considerable evidence which suggests at least one-third and perhaps as many as one-half of all Protestant church members do not feel a sense of belonging to the congregation of which they are members. They have been received into membership but have never felt they have been accepted into the fellowship circle.”¹⁵ The tenuous connection these members have with their churches increases their vulnerability to discouragement, false teaching, temptation, and a disconnect from other believers. The believer’s greatest obligation is to possess a consuming love for God and, as a result, a compassionate love for others (Mark 12:30-31). Without this love, all efforts at assimilation will lack evidence of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and produce unsatisfying results (1 Cor 13:1-3).

Barriers to Assimilation

Joining God in His work of making and multiplying disciples requires connecting a new believer to a local church through mentoring relationships. The process of creating these connections and building these relationships is assimilation. However deeply one may believe the Scripture and seek to join Christ in His work does not guarantee assimilation will be accomplished. Multiple challenges and barriers exist that may prevent or derail the assimilation process. This section organizes these challenges into five general types of barriers: perceived, impersonal, personal, projected, and process.

Perceived Barriers

Newcomers seeking to connect with a church family may have perceived barriers. These barriers are not necessarily obstacles, but as long as something is perceived as a barrier the newcomer will not feel at home in the fellowship. It is important for church leadership to be aware of any perceived barriers in order to mitigate their effect on assimilation.

¹⁵ Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Successful Churches Reveal What Works, and What Doesn't* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 169.

Someone has said that “perception is reality.” While I do not fully agree with the statement, I do agree one’s perception determines response. Whether a perception is accurate or not, opinions are formed and judgements are made. This idea applies to impressions of people, titles, terms, denominations, buildings, and cultures. However inaccurate and unfair these judgments may be does not change the fact people make assumptions and base their decisions upon them. Understanding that everyone may be unreasonably judged by preconceived notions is one step toward overcoming this barrier to assimilation.

Whether the personal barrier felt by newcomers is a perception or reality, they are still barriers. Shortly after the founding of the church at Pentecost, Hellenistic Jews believed their widows were being “overlooked” when food was distributed (Acts 6:1). To rectify the situation, whether perceived or actual, the church leaders acted to remove any barrier caused by even the appearance of inequity.

A perception sure to repel newcomers is insincerity. In an article titled “Seven Great and Seven Bad Experiences of First-time Church Guests,” one interviewee described his experience visiting a particular church: “The friendliness seemed contrived and fake.”¹⁶ In such cases, the traditional greeting time practiced by many churches does not help and may actually reinforce the guest’s opinion of superficiality, unless members personally introduce themselves before they leave.

Impersonal Barriers

Churches may have impersonal barriers that make it difficult for newcomers to feel accepted. This category includes hindrances caused by the church as an organization rather than by personalities represented in the church. These barriers are not based on personalities, but obstacles created by structure, systems, reputation, and organization.

¹⁶ Thom S. Rainer, “Seven Great and Seven Bad Experiences of First-Time Church Guests,” *Facts and Trends*, October 12, 2017, <https://factsandtrends.net/2017/10/12/seven-great-seven-bad-experiences-first-time-church-guests/#comments>.

Many times, churches are unaware that such barriers exist. How churches respond when they become aware of an impersonal barrier determines whether the barrier remains. If impersonal barriers are discovered and no attempt is made to remove or reduce the obstruction to outsiders, then they become personal barriers. In such cases, people have personally chosen to allow or even defend something at the expense of reaching people with the gospel. Such calloused indifference to God's will is inexcusable.

Calvin Ratz states, "Visitors often feel uneasy when they first attend church. They're on strange turf. Much of what we do in our services, though familiar to members, is intimidating to visitors."¹⁷ Simple matters such as religious jargon may cause anxiety to a newcomer. Among the comments recorded for an article in *Facts and Trends*, someone said, "I didn't know what they were talking about. It was a lot of internal language and acronyms.' Lesson: Don't expect guests to speak your churchy language. Expect them not to return if you do."¹⁸

A newcomer may find more impersonal barriers within church facilities. Two areas considered by many to be crucial to guests are the nursery and restrooms. If parents are not satisfied with the safety, cleanliness, and quality of the environment awaiting their children then they will have no desire to attend. Clean, fresh, modern restrooms are also a necessity for newcomers. Additional impersonal barriers hindering newcomers include a lack of indoor signage, classroom or worship attendance exceeding 80 percent of the room's capacity, and worship style. It is an unfortunate reality that few can easily adapt to worship styles that are novel to them.

¹⁷ Calvin Ratz, "Assimilating Newcomers," *Christianity Today*, May 19, 2004, www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/leadership-books/masteringoutreach/mstmin10-8.html.

¹⁸ Rainer, "Seven Great and Seven Bad Experiences."

Personal Barriers

A third category of barriers to assimilation newcomers may encounter is personal barriers. These personal barriers may vary from person to person and even be difficult for the newcomer to describe. Ratz points out, “Some people don’t want to be integrated into any church. They may lack a basic commitment to God, and no amount of friendliness will make them stay. Others bear the imprint of our culture that recoils from commitment to anything.”¹⁹ In a *Christianity Today* Leadership Forum, Rick Lobs, rector of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Geneva, Illinois, comments, “Sometimes people come to us and want to receive only the by-products of the Christian church. They have no intention of assimilating.”²⁰

The very nature of personal barriers makes them difficult to diagnose and resolve. It would not be surprising to find people with different backgrounds, places of birth, and cultural norms sense a certain awkwardness when they are together. Differences such as education, income, profession, and urban or rural living cause some to feel uncomfortable or out of place. Through no fault of their own or the church, some people may simply not be comfortable in certain churches. In these cases, a new member blaming the church, or church leadership blaming the member, only increases barriers. Ratz refers to the challenge of overcoming personal barriers: “People aren’t all the same. Even if they speak English, they don’t all talk the same language. And while those differences shouldn’t affect how people interact, they do make a difference in how comfortable outsiders feel when they come into a church.”²¹

Cultural practices that work effectively in some churches may actually deter assimilation. While some practices churches use to welcome guests may work in some

¹⁹ Ratz, “Assimilating Newcomers.”

²⁰ Leadership Forum, “The Many Faces of Assimilation,” *Christianity Today*, Fall 1990, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/1990/fall/9014016.html?share=hMC1j6Uj3RZ47biultoEdsOB4Hzd9qWB>.

²¹ Ratz, “Assimilating Newcomers.”

places, they would embarrass or even offend guests in other places. For example, asking guests to wear nametags or remain seated during the stand and greet time may show how warm and friendly a church is to some, while others would be mortified.

Not all personal barriers are the result of cultural cogs not meshing in the connection wheel. Far too often, connections with newcomers fail because members are self-contained and self-absorbed. If Anderson is accurate in saying that “members may be the number one reason most churches exist,” then newcomers will have a difficult time feeling accepted.²² Ratz believes that “attitudes of insiders” is likely the greatest obstacle to assimilation.²³ Richelle Mead writes in *Gameboard of the Gods*, “You guys are so caught up in your polished images and your passive-aggressive comments that no one ever comes right out and says anything. Well, I’m going to.”²⁴ It may well be time for someone to say something to those who are so “caught up” in their own personal religious routines and indifferent to welcoming newcomers that they actually hinder God’s mission.

Conversely, it is possible to make a newcomer feel uncomfortable and rushed by inundating them with attention. In *Breaking the Missional Code*, Ed Stetzer and David Putman observe, “Many guests are simply not sure if they want to take the next step. Moving too quickly can be as damaging as not moving at all, in terms of our response toward new people.”²⁵

²² Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century*, chap. 10, sec. “For Whom Churches Exist,” para. 19.

²³ Ratz, “Assimilating Newcomers.”

²⁴ Richelle Mead, *Gameboard of the Gods* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 337.

²⁵ Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 149.

Projected Barriers

Another category of barriers to assimilation is projected barriers. These barriers are projected by established church members who may be oblivious to the signals they are sending newcomers that make them feel like outsiders. Church members may sincerely want their church to grow, and even take steps to facilitate growth, yet at the same time unwittingly erect barriers undermining their very efforts. Whether one knowingly creates an obstacle to assimilation or is unaware of the problems he creates, barriers still must be overcome.

Far too often, the preferences of members elevate non-essential traditions as though they were sacred. This problem is potentially confusing or even misleading for newcomers. In a similar way, stained glass windows may keep out the light even though they are beautiful and meaningful to members, these long-held traditions may hinder the clarity of the mission. When I have asked some members about changing cherished traditions I have been met with surprise and sometimes anger. Many do not consider how an outsider thinks and some simply do not care. Even so, nearly all would describe their church as “friendly.” Karl Vaters writes, “Whether he’s hidden behind stained glass windows or laser lights and fog machines, anything that obscures Jesus instead of revealing him needs to be ditched.”²⁶

In his blog article “Six Reasons Your Church Might Not Be as Friendly as You Think It Is,” Rainer explains, “Most church members really do think their church is very friendly. But, more times than not, they are wrong. Guests who visit the churches usually have a much different perspective.”²⁷ I have rarely met a church member who would not describe their church as “friendly.” Despite the oft-mistaken self-perception of church

²⁶ Karl Vaters, “7 Steps to Start Becoming a Church People Want to Commit To,” February 6, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2017/february/7-steps-to-start-becoming-church-people-want-to-commit-to.html>.

²⁷ Thom Rainer, “Six Reasons Your Church Might Not Be as Friendly as You Think It Is,” Church Answers Blog, November 8, 2014, <https://thomrainer.com/2014/11/six-reasons-church-might-friendly-think/>.

members, a great deal of research has led Rainer to state, “Our surveys over a ten-year period indicate that over eight in ten guests did not consider the church they visited to be friendly.”²⁸

Churches may project a “no-vacancy” message to newcomers because their families, groups, and cliques are full, and no places are available for anyone new.

Anderson says,

One of the more common criticisms of established churches comes from those who feel the fellowship is tough to penetrate: “When I first visited Community Church, people were so friendly. I was greeted by almost everyone. I thought it was the friendliest church I had ever seen. But then I ran into a brick wall after just a few weeks. They were too busy to become friends. Now, after being a member for a full year, I still feel like an outsider.”²⁹

This phenomenon has been called the “Lego syndrome.” In his thesis, Jon Harless defines

Lego syndrome [as a] term describing the theory that emotionally people can only maintain a certain number of close relationships at any one time in a beneficial capacity. Like the Lego, every person has only so many slots that can connect to others and after these connections are made, no further deep relational connections can be made unless one previous relationship is broken.³⁰

Bud Brown observes, “The loving bonds of friendship that tie the church members together end up becoming barriers to those who’d like to elbow their way into the congregation.”³¹

An article in *Technology Review*, titled “Your Brain Limits You to Just Five BFFs,” contains fascinating research originally conducted by British anthropologist Robin Dunbar that seems to support the “Lego syndrome.” The article states, “By plotting

²⁸ Rainer, “Six Reasons.”

²⁹ Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century*, chap. 7, sec. “Health Signs,” para. 42.

³⁰ Jon Thaddeus Harless, “Transformational Discipleship: A Model for Sermon Based Small Groups for Life Transformation” (DMin thesis, Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 158.

³¹ Bud Brown, “Guest Assimilation: The Turnaround Pastor’s Roadmap,” accessed October 1, 2018, <https://www.turnaroundpastor.com/guest-assimilation-for-church/>.

the correlation and extrapolating the curve to the size of the human brain, [Dunbar] predicted that humans could have no more than about 150 people in their social sphere.”³² These findings have been shared by many others doing similar research. Interestingly, evidence supporting this research has been found “in the sizes of hunter-gatherer societies, Roman legions, and effective businesses.”³³

Some barriers are intentionally projected. A clear indication of members who cannot or will not make room for a new person is ignoring a newcomer. Like the character in Joanne Harris’ *Chocolat*, guests may say, ““No one looks at us. We might as well be invisible.”³⁴ Possessive and controlling members who resist relinquishing ministry positions may as well place a neon “No Vacancy” on the church sign and save seekers time. After a year of attending a local church, a young couple said, “This congregation will let you into the building, but they won’t let you into the fellowship. They’ll let you into the membership, but they won’t let you into the church. We haven’t been attending very much lately.”³⁵

In *Sticky Church*, Larry Osborne addresses the tension between keeping established members and reaching new members:

Everything we do is aimed at helping the Christians we already have grow stronger in Christ. But everything is done in such a way that their non-Christian friends will understand all that we’re saying and doing. Bottom line: We’ve tried to create a perfect storm for come-and-see evangelism while velcroing newcomers for long-term spiritual growth.³⁶

³² Emerging Technology from the arXiv, “Your Brain Limits You to Just Five BFFs,” *MIT Technology Review*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2016/04/29/160438/your-brain-limits-you-to-just-five-bffs/#/set/id/601363>.

³³ Emerging Technology from the arXiv, “Your Brain Limits You.”

³⁴ Joanne Harris, *Chocolat* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 3.

³⁵ Herb Miller, “Church Effectiveness Nuggets, Volume 7: How to Build Assimilation Bridges for New Members/Attendees,” *The Parish Paper*, 2009, accessed October 1, 2018, <https://www.theparishpaper.com/sites/default/files/resources/Church%20Effectiveness%20Nuggets-%20Volume%207.pdf>, 2.

³⁶ Larry Osborne, *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 20, Kindle.

Osborne continues by saying that those who leave their church usually do over minor matters such as “allowing coffee in the sanctuary, changing the worship style, or using the subwoofers at full capacity.”³⁷ While likely speaking somewhat tongue-in-cheek, he raises a serious issue—members who are offended at non-essential matters.

Relatively minor matters that may seem harmless to those new to the church may only serve to exacerbate the irritation of members with a consumer mentality. The tendency of today’s church members to act as consumers rather than committed servants no doubt creates tension in churches attempting to find ways to accommodate the unchurched while holding true to the gospel.

Few barriers to newcomers are more effective than strife among members. Dissension is far too common in churches and is a natural guest repellent. As Paul told the Corinthians, “your meetings do more harm than good” (1 Cor 11:17). Robert Perry observes, “Most people are wanting a church to be a place of refuge and peace.”³⁸ Fractured fellowships are unhealthy environments that create barriers where disciple making becomes difficult, if not impossible. Members who create or foster dissension in a church care more about themselves than the glory of God and the destiny of the lost.

Process Barriers

How people come to Christ and are formally connected to the church has real implications as to whether they will be assimilated or not. Pastors and people may have worked very hard to “reach the lost at any cost,” as the saying goes, but factors involved with how people are reached may influence the retention of newcomers. For years, churches have attempted to experience real revival among members while also reaching those without Christ. Over time, “attractional” evangelism could include almost anything

³⁷ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 20-21.

³⁸ Vicki Brown, “Studies, Experts Suggest Why Some Christians Like Church Shopping,” *Baptist News*, March 2, 2015, <https://baptistnews.com/article/studies-experts-suggest-why-some-christians-like-church-shopping/#.XGHkLy2ZN25>.

that draws a crowd where an evangelistic appeal can be presented. Through these events the gospel is shared, and God has brought many to repentance. Anecdotal experience seems to indicate church members have found inviting others to join them at special events relatively easy compared to an invitation to a formal church service.

Rainer reports that “7 percent of the most effective evangelistic churches avoid event evangelism but almost half embrace revival evangelism.”³⁹ One reason for this may be the built-in connection to the church that typifies a revival invitation. One pastor in Rainer’s research said, “We found that assimilation of new Christians to be extremely difficult unless they first made their decision known to the body.”⁴⁰

Another challenge to assimilating new members who joined the church through a special event or special series of services is the sheer number of people who need to be assimilated at one time. If a church is not well-prepared for those who respond, then the church’s assimilation or discipleship process may be overwhelmed, new relationships are not likely to be built, and follow-up may be non-existent.

Finally, some evangelistic methods have been shown to result in less assimilation of new members than others. In *Assimilating Visitors into Your Church*, Win Arn and Charles Arn report that three evangelistic approaches are more prone to result in members falling away from church. First, “a decision-oriented approach tends to create dropouts.”⁴¹ A “decision-oriented approach” could be described as an evangelistic effort used by one without a relationship with the people being evangelized that pushes for a decision before the decision itself is understood. Second, it was found that “evangelism

³⁹ Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 34.

⁴⁰ Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, 34.

⁴¹ Win Arn and Charles Arn, “Closing the Back Door,” in *Practical Ministry Skills: Assimilating Visitors Into Your Church*, accessed March 16, 2015, https://www.bclstore.com/products/assimilating-visitors-into-your-church?pos=1&_sid=6b9031d48&_ss=r, 4.

that presents the gospel once and then asks for a response tends to create dropouts.”⁴² Albeit the fact many have responded the first time they heard the gospel and continued to fruitfully follow Christ, it is Arn and Arn’s contention is that this practice is unusual and “the fewer the exposures prior to the commitment, the greater the likelihood of dropping out.”⁴³ Third, “evangelism that does not build relationships within the local church” is less likely to lead to long-term involvement in the church. It is worthy of note that in all three of these methods, new converts are lacking in relationships with believers. Arn and Arn offer an important reminder: “The biblical goal is not simply an oral confession but a life transformed and a participating member of Christ’s body.”⁴⁴

This summary of barriers to assimilation highlights some of the more common reasons churches fail to establish lasting connections with newcomers. God does not desire to make it more difficult than necessary for outsiders to connect with believers, hear the gospel, turn to Him, and grow in genuine fellowship with His church (Acts 15:19). Christ-followers should seek to remove every barrier that could hinder a newcomer from coming to Christ and being assimilated within a local church.⁴⁵

Best Assimilation Practices

Before looking at an overview of the best current assimilation practices, it is important to acknowledge that no practice, however pragmatic and seemingly successful, will produce eternal results without the grace of God. The purpose of assimilation is to make disciples. As disciples are made and multiplied, churches grow in Christlikeness and number. The term “church growth” was once popular in church leadership circles,

⁴² Arn and Arn, “Closing the Back Door,” 4.

⁴³ Arn and Arn, “Closing the Back Door,” 4.

⁴⁴ Arn and Arn, “Closing the Back Door,” 4.

⁴⁵ In 1 Cor 9:1-23; 10:24-11:1, Paul exemplifies the attitude of a servant who is willing to surrender his rights so that others may hear the gospel and believe.

but over time an increasing number of church leaders began to associate the church growth movement exclusively with human efforts to increase church attendance. Properly understood, biblical church growth does not preclude the use of applied wisdom based on biblical principles.⁴⁶

Some of the practices found to increase the effectiveness of assimilation may well be criticized for the same reason as church growth strategies. Practical ideas that facilitate increased assimilation, and thereby the making of disciples, could simply be called “God-given common sense.” While one may draw helpful principles from nature, farming, business, and even sports, the church is not, nor should it be, reliant upon business practices. Karl Vaters sees this tendency and cautions of business ideas becoming more important than biblical principles. If this practice takes place, he warns, “We’ll start judging results by business standards, not biblical ones. Eventually we’ll replace our principles in the same way. What gets the numbers up will become more important than biblical integrity.”⁴⁷ With this in mind, this chapter shall explore some of the best assimilation practices of churches that effectively assimilate new members.

Assistance of Automation

The importance of making disciples cannot be overstated. Therefore, the process of assimilating newcomers for the purpose of discipleship must be a priority and churches should take advantage of every tool available. Tracking the progress of those God sends is essential. Anderson gives this example:

William Ramsden recommends tracking church visitors. Rate the welcome factor of the church by how many first-time visitors (excluding out-of-town guests) come a second time and by how many third-time visitors eventually join the congregation.

⁴⁶ Gary McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church* (Nashville: Baker, 2003).

⁴⁷ Karl Vaters, “Why We Need to Be Careful about Adopting Business Models in Our Churches,” *Christianity Today*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2019/may/business-models-in-churches.html?paging=off>.

He measures the incorporation factor by how many church positions are filled by volunteers who have joined the church in the past three years.⁴⁸

The only way to know whether a church is connecting with newcomers and assimilating them for discipleship is to identify and track visitors. While some may say tracking guests and members sounds cold and businesslike, it is actually indicative of a church's concern. The motive for gathering information on an individual or family, updating it, and acting on it is not to make a sale, but to ensure they are given appropriate and timely care.

Effective practices of assimilation have evolved over time with changes in culture and advancements in technology that help ministries track people and follow up for discipleship. The days of index cards and file cabinets have been replaced with soft-copy data stored in a cloud and immediately accessible by multiple users of a platform, such as Church Community Builder (CCB).⁴⁹ CCB is a relatively new company devoted to helping churches develop and maintain relationships with guests and new members by the means of technology.⁵⁰ In an article titled "12 Ways to Maximize Your Church's Relational Connections," the goal of assimilation was succinctly described as helping churches "move people from 'I'm here' to 'I'm all in.'"⁵¹

Discovering and applying the best technological tool to assist with assimilation is wise. With technology, churches can better ensure that follow up takes place and people are not forgotten. Effective follow up may be done in many different ways, including

⁴⁸ Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century*, chap. 7, sec. "Health Signs," para. 52.

⁴⁹ Church Community Builder, accessed October 12, 2019, <https://www.churchcommunitybuilder.com>.

⁵⁰ Church Community Builder explains, "In 1998, Chris Fowler and Free Grafton started working on internet-based tools to help people in their church connect with each other, and to make sure people weren't falling through the cracks when their desire was to find connection and community." Church Community Builder, "About Us," accessed October 12, 2019, <https://www.churchcommunitybuilder.com/about-us>.

⁵¹ Church Community Builder, "12 Ways to Maximize Your Church's Relational Connections," April 17, 2019, <https://resources.churchcommunitybuilder.com/articles/assimilation-guests-to-engaged>.

prewritten scheduled text messages and emails that are triggered at certain times or in response to certain actions. Marketing professionals use a sales-funnel to build email lists and narrow contacts through successive steps until a sale is made. Those actively seeking to make disciples will find themselves building and growing relationships in a similar way. One may try to remember details of every encounter, keep a hard-copy journal for notes on each relationship's progress, or use a tool such as CCB. The more relationships one is building, the more details will need to be remembered. Until the local church has every member personally taking the initiative to make disciples and mentor new believers, church leadership will need some type of system to make follow up as efficient and effective as possible.⁵²

Leadership's Role

Those in positions of influence must model relationship-building and provide needed training and encouragement if churches are to develop a culture of connecting with newcomers. Merle Mees says,

About four times a year, I give a manners talk to the congregation: Guests get the best parking, the cleanest restrooms, the highest quality nursery, the warmest welcome ("Make sure to introduce them to others, invite them to sit with you, offer them directions, invite them to lunch"). I remind the church what it's like to visit a church for the first time. I give examples of how to meet people without embarrassing them or yourself: "Hi, my name is Merle Mees. How long have you been attending Western Hills?"⁵³

Church leadership should feel a certain amount of responsibility for the assimilation of members. Joshua Huffman writes, "We understand that not everyone who shows up to our church will end up staying, but we felt it was our responsibility to

⁵² Rick Warren states, "Since the incorporation of new members into your church fellowship does not happen automatically, you have to develop a system and structure to assimilate and keep the people you reach." Rick Warren, "Develop a Plan to Assimilate Members," May 5, 2006, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/develop-a-plan-to-assimilate-members.html>.

⁵³ Merle Mees, "Help Guests Feel at Home," *Christianity Today* (Summer 1998): 53-56.

remove every single excuse they would have NOT to stay other than God was leading them elsewhere.”⁵⁴ As a leader, Huffman sets the assimilation expectation for his staff and church.

Thanks to the research of Thom Rainer, students of church health have learned that creating a culture of high expectations in churches is beneficial to assimilation. Rainer states, “Effective assimilation churches have one primary characteristic that sets them apart from churches that do not keep their member in active involvement. Effective assimilation churches had high expectations of all their members.”⁵⁵ Leadership sets and patterns expectations.

Effective Timing

Churches desiring to establish a meaningful and lasting relationship with newcomers should be aware of the windows of opportunity God provides. Tom Clegg explains, “A visitor usually decides within three to eight minutes whether they’ll come back to your church.”⁵⁶ Herb Miller believes one senses the warmth or coldness of a congregation almost immediately: “The emotional atmosphere becomes obvious in 120 seconds.”⁵⁷ He believes the atmosphere is distinguishable through the “body language of the people.”⁵⁸ Clearly, first impressions are important.

⁵⁴ Joshua Huffman, “Assimilation: Turning Guests Into Family,” accessed September 12, 2018, <https://www.tonycooke.org/articles-by-others/assimilation-guests-into-family/>.

⁵⁵ Thom Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 23.

⁵⁶ Tom Clegg, quoted in “Church Trends from the Top 100,” accessed October 1, 2018, <https://outreach.com/media/CMS/2015/Specials/hover/2015-outreach-ebook-church-trends.pdf>, 25.

⁵⁷ Miller, “Church Effectiveness Nuggets,” 4.

⁵⁸ Miller, “Church Effectiveness Nuggets,” 4.

Beyond the initial encounter, Jordan Cramer believes ninety days is an important measuring point for assimilation.⁵⁹ Beyond the initial three months, Robert Orr writes that, “of newcomers who join and later become inactive, 70 to 75 percent drop out during their first year.”⁶⁰ Charles Arn’s research narrows the time period and found that 80 percent of those who left their church did so in six months.⁶¹

One who visits a church is presumably seeking and open to guidance. This interest may not last long and their openness to influence may soon diminish. Therefore, follow-up should begin immediately. Huffman describes what seems to be the typical initial response of many churches: “Within 24 hours we follow up with an email. Within 48 hours we follow up with a phone call. Within 72 hours we mail a handwritten card that includes a \$5 gift card to a local coffee shop (Starbucks) or sandwich shop (Subway).”⁶² Promptly responding to a guest to build and maintain a caring relationship is the foundation for assimilation that results in discipleship.

Friendship Is Foundational

For those who would make disciples, the importance of establishing growing relationships with others should be second only to a growing relationship with Christ (Mark 12:30-31). God works through relationships. Jesus’ development of the men He was to deploy to make disciples of all people groups was based on His relationship with them.

Ideally, one would hope a guest who attends a worship service already has a relationship with a caring Christ-follower within the church. What draws a person to a church may be what is needed to keep a person in church. Those who visit a church

⁵⁹ Jordan Cramer, “Easter Aftermath: More than a One-time Visit,” April 2, 2018, <https://replicate.org/easter-aftermath-more-than-a-one-time-visit/>.

⁶⁰ Robert Orr, quoted in Miller, “Church Effectiveness Nuggets,” 5.

⁶¹ Charles Arn, “How to Assimilate New Members into Your Church,” accessed September 3, 2006, <http://www.netresults.org/workshops/arn.htm>.

⁶² Huffman, “Assimilation.”

because of the invitation of a friend are more likely to return. Rainer states, “If the new member has no relationship with a church member when he or she joins the church, it is exceedingly difficult to create relationships. Such is the reason why it is critically important for church members to become highly intentional about developing relationships with unchurched persons before that person ever visits the church.”⁶³

Once a newcomer visits a church, relationships are one of the most important factors in their assimilation. According to Rainer, “Of the hundreds of interviews I have conducted, an overwhelming majority listed the friendliness of the people as a major attraction to the particular church they eventually joined.”⁶⁴ Mankind needs relationships. Loneliness is not at all uncommon, even in an age known for its connectivity. In *Beyond the Immigrant Enclave*, Susan Wierzbicki writes, “When Apollinaire wrote of boarding-house life, ‘We fasten and then bolt each door, Bearing self-love and no more,’ he understood the potential loneliness of the unattached sojourner.”⁶⁵

When John and Andrew began following Jesus, they were seeking a relationship. Jesus asked them, “What do you want? They said, ‘Rabbi’ (which means Teacher) ‘where are you staying?’ The Lord’s reply, “Come,” He replied, “and you will see” (John 1:38-39). Such a simple interaction is easy to overlook, but it shows how Jesus responded immediately to seekers. He invited them into His personal life and allowed them to spend a day with him.

The verses that follow this encounter show that the first thing men did after spending time with Jesus was to invite others. Andrew invited his brother Peter and

⁶³ Thom Rainer. “Four Principles for Membership Retention,” *Christianity Today*, July 11, 2007, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/july-online-only/thom-rainer-four-principles-membership-retention.html>.

⁶⁴ Thom Rainer, “The Friendliness Factor,” *Church Central*, June 29, 2010, <http://www.buildingchurchleaders.com/articles/2010/friendlinessfactor.html>.

⁶⁵ Susan Wierzbicki, “Beyond the Immigrant Enclave: Network Change and Assimilation,” 2004, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://www.questia.com/read/121167434>, 1.

Philip invited his friend Nathanael (John 1:40-45). Ken Hemphill states, “Different researchers have shown that somewhere between 79% to 86% of people are members of the church they now attend because they were brought by a friend or relative.”⁶⁶

Small Groups

Jesus’ model of discipleship is based on small group relationships. It should be of no surprise that one of the most important tools for assimilation is the small group. Larry Osborne, author of *Sticky Church* and pastor of North Coast Church in California, has no doubt what creates effective assimilation: “By far the most powerful tool for keeping our back door shut and making the church sticky has been our commitment to sermon-based small groups.”⁶⁷ While some may have the tendency to consider high attendance during worship their measure of success, Osborne is just the opposite. He sees small “groups as the hub of our ministry—more important than even the weekend services.”⁶⁸

Osborne has good reason to be enthusiastic about small groups. The first small group gathering for discipleship was when the Lord invited John and Andrew to join Him (John 1:35-39). It was informal and the only planning necessary was done by God. This simple invitation resulted in the start of a small group that would change the world. It was founded on a growing relationship with the Lord. The goal of assimilation is healthy relationships growing in love for God and one another.

While doing research for his book *High Expectations*, Rainer found the “percentage of new Christians who remain active in the church five years later” was

⁶⁶ Ken Hemphill, *Velcro Church* (Tigerville, SC: Auxano Press, 2011), preface, sec. “A Simple Overview,” para. 2, Kindle.

⁶⁷ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 21.

⁶⁸ Osborne, *Sticky Church*, 22.

dramatically increased when the member was active in Sunday School.⁶⁹ Only 16 percent of new members were still active after five years if they only attended the worship service. Yet, when new members were involved in Sunday School, 83 percent remained active in the church five years later. When I asked him whether this fact was still true today, Rainer said, “It is old research, originally compiled for my book, *High Expectations*. I would not hold to the accuracy of the data today, but I would venture to say it is directionally correct.”⁷⁰ Clearly, small groups are an essential ingredient in effective assimilation that results in discipleship.

Membership Classes

Assimilation into a local body of Christ is essential for discipleship. In recent years, the prevalence of churches offering courses for new members has grown. In his blog, Rainer looked at his results from a 1997 survey and compared them to a non-scientific Twitter poll he conducted and said, “The change is remarkable if not dramatic. The number of churches requiring a membership class has increased 400 percent in 15 years!”⁷¹

More recently, regarding his “anecdotal data”⁷² Rainer said, “Ten years ago when we engaged churches about 10% of them had new member classes. Five years ago, the number was close to 50%. Today the numbers are around 75%.”⁷³ Rainer added, “I

⁶⁹ Rainer, *High Expectations*, 45.

⁷⁰ This quote was taken from Thom Rainer, “16 of 100 Active after 5 Years if Not in Small Group,” as part of an online discussion for Church Answers members. The quote was Rainer’s response to author’s inquiry, February 11, 2019.

⁷¹ Thom Rainer, “Seven Trends in Church New Member Classes,” November 16, 2013, <https://thomrainer.com/2013/11/seven-trends-in-church-new-member-classes/>.

⁷² Rainer, response to author’s inquiry through Church Answers, November 1, 2019.

⁷³ Rainer, response to author’s inquiry through Church Answers, November 1, 2019.

would believe the numbers are skewed high”⁷⁴ because he believed the churches contacting him were familiar with his “advocacy for the classes.”⁷⁵

In the blog article entitled “Seven Trends in Church New Member Classes,” Rainer noted that new member classes being a prerequisite for membership has “become a normative church practice. Indeed, this church practice is almost as pervasive as churches that have small groups or Sunday school classes.”⁷⁶ Chuck Lawless writes, “More churches are emphasizing membership, including requiring a membership class.”⁷⁷ Even so, I have encountered some who do not see the need for a new member class and vehemently oppose classes being required for church membership.

The arguments against new member classes and requiring them for membership center on two polemics. First, some say, “We are saved by grace and requiring a class is a work” and second, others say, “You will run people off if you require it.” The first argument is theological while the second is practical. Neither are valid.

If a church should infer salvation is attained by church membership, which is attained by attending a class, then its teaching is unorthodox and heretical. In such a case, the critic of new member classes would have every reason to object. Orthodox doctrine, however, prevents such an unbiblical practice. Right doctrine goes even further by lifting up the importance of teaching throughout both Old and New Testaments. Any discussion of assimilation for the purpose of disciple making must include Matthew 28:18-20, also known as the Great Commission. In this passage, “teaching” (διδάσκειν) is as important

⁷⁴ Rainer, response to author’s inquiry through Church Answers, November 1, 2019.

⁷⁵ Rainer, response to author’s inquiry through Church Answers, November 1, 2019.

⁷⁶ Rainer, “Seven Trends in Church New Member Classes.”

⁷⁷ Chuck Lawless, “9 Trends in Church Membership and Assimilation Processes,” April 14, 2016, <http://chucklawless.com/2016/04/9-trends-in-church-membership-and-assimilation-processes/>.

as the two other verbs, “go” and “baptize.” A disciple will not be made without teaching. Regarding the importance of teaching Karl Rengstorf writes, “In Mt. 28:20 the Risen Lord made the continuation of this task the life work of His people.”⁷⁸

For those who say requiring a class for membership will hinder church growth, I would need to clarify the type of church growth of which they are speaking. If they are concerned about the number of members on a church roll or in attendance, then they are correct. I have seen some balk at the idea of attending a class and decide to attend another church. That type of growth would likely suffer. On the other hand, if their definition of church growth requires members be only regenerated Christ-followers as Scripture describes, then the teaching of a new member class contributes to the making, maturing, and multiplying of disciples that is biblical church growth.

As the popularity of new member classes have grown, so has the variety of ways classes are conducted. A summary of best practices of new member classes could be organized by timing, curriculum, and follow-up. Concerning timing, it is wise to schedule the class soon after someone expresses a desire to become a member. The potential member’s desire to join the church and serve Christ demonstrates the movement of God, the Holy Spirit. The church must determine to be responsive to God’s work. A church that celebrates what God is doing in the life of the potential member not only confirms what the new member believes but also connects with them an important time that facilitates the building and bonding of relationships.

The duration of a class for new members should be determined by the content. Some churches provide basic training that requires only two to three hours. I believe more time is required to introduce potential members to the essentials of following Christ and serving Him in the church. Brandon Cox, pastor of Grace Hills Church in

⁷⁸ Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “Διδάσκω, Διδάσκαλος, Νομοδιδάσκαλος, Καλοδιδάσκαλος, Ψευδοδιδάσκαλος, Διδασκαλία, Ἐτεροδιδασκαλέω, Διδαχή, Διδακτός, Διδακτικός,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 145.

Bentonville, Arkansas, lists “eight major steps a believer should take as they become part of a church community . . . following Jesus, being baptized, getting connected to a small group, growing in grace and knowledge, serving others, giving regularly, living on mission, and signing the covenant.”⁷⁹

Recidivism declines when members are assimilated. New Member classes have been shown to increase assimilation, thereby closing the “back door” of the church. Membership classes should be strongly encouraged for church membership as a part of obeying the Lord’s commission to “make disciples” (Matt 28:20).

Conclusion

This chapter described the common challenges churches face in the process of assimilation, and potential solutions for these challenges. It has been demonstrated that assimilation is not optional for churches taking the Lord’s Great Commission seriously. The goal of Christ’s Commission (Matt 28:18-20) is making and multiplying His followers. The New Testament reveals that His followers took His Commission seriously, which resulted in genuine church growth as local assemblies of Christ followers increased as a consequence of obeying the Great Commission. Churches characterized by healthy practices (devotion to Scripture, fellowship, communion, prayer, worship, and evangelism [Acts 2:42-47]) typically realized an increase in Christ-followers. As in New Testament times, today’s churches are hindered by barriers diverting the fellowship away from Christ and His Commission. Nevertheless, churches willing to honestly address sin with repentance and wisely use available tools and methods in the power of the Spirit, may be used by God to make disciples.

⁷⁹ Brandon Cox, “Free Church Newcomers and Membership Class Curriculum,” accessed November 2, 2019, <https://brandonacox.com/membership-class-curriculum/>.

CHAPTER 4
ESTABLISHING A NEW MEMBER
ASSIMILATION PROCESS

Introduction

The purpose of this project was to establish the assimilation process of Airport Baptist Church (ABC) in Greer, South Carolina by introducing changes that will ultimately increase the number of new members actively participating in the mission of the church. This project had five goals, and each goal was intended to aid in the establishment of the assimilation process for new members. In essence, the goals sought to discover effective methods for connecting with newcomers, enlisting them to attend the new members course that used the curriculum, see knowledge increase among attendees, and for those not already in a small group and participating in ministry to get involved and serve. It was hoped that this project would strengthen the unity of ABC around Christ and His mission for its members, resulting in members who not only faithfully attend, but also mature in Christ and multiply disciples. This project intended to accomplish the following goals:

1. The first goal was to find the most effective ways to gather personal contact information from guests in order to invite them to participate in ABC's new member class.
2. The second goal was to write a six-session curriculum for the membership class with supplemental video to provide the essential information and encouragement necessary to enable a prospective member to follow Christ as an active part of ABC.
3. The third goal of this project was to hold a six-week new member class attended by at least 25 percent of visitors who provided contact information.
4. The fourth goal was to increase the knowledge of meaningful church membership among participants at the new member class.
5. The fifth goal was for 80 percent of those completing the new member class to join a small group and 75 percent of those completing it and becoming a church member to begin participating in a ministry at ABC.

This chapter describes the four phases of the project and shows the process by which the five goals were to be accomplished.

The Formulation Phase

By reviewing the goals, I was reminded of the overall objective: to establish a new member assimilation process. Each goal contained important facets that would combine to accomplish the particular goal, and each goal combined to produce the desired objective. After looking at the goals and their various ingredients, I began by formulating the project in five areas that were necessary to lay the groundwork for building the project.

A Survey of Area Pastors within the Three Rivers Baptist Association

To launch this project and see it to completion, it was necessary at the very beginning, week 1, to look at the goals in detail and determine what tools and resources would be required. The first goal was to find the most effective ways to gather personal contact information from guests in order to invite them to participate in ABC's new member class. If the people of ABC desire to connect with newcomers, see them follow Christ, and bear fruit, then relationships must be built. This first goal would be the first tangible step toward developing a meaningful relationship with a newcomer. When a newcomer shares personal information with a church, it indicates a basic level of trust in the church as well as an interest in connecting. Therefore, it would be beneficial to know what approaches area pastors use and what methods work best for them.

To achieve the first goal, I needed the email addresses of the pastors who led churches within the Three Rivers Baptist Association. With the help of Randy Bradley, the Director of Missions for the Three Rivers Baptist Association, I had a list of 110 pastors and their email addresses. I uploaded the names and addresses to my web-based relationship management application, Cloze. I created a group for these churches by which I could send one email that would be personalized for each pastor by using the

process known as mail merge. I prepared an email to introduce myself and solicit their help with a brief survey for this project.¹ I designed the survey using Google Forms² and included a link to the survey within the email.³ In week 21, I sent the first email to area pastors.

Writing New Member Course Curriculum

The second goal was to write a six-session curriculum for the membership class with supplemental videos to provide the essential information and encouragement to enable a prospective member to follow Christ as an active part of ABC. Although a few examples of new member training material already existed, I desired to write my own to ensure it could help seekers evaluate their relationship with Christ, begin to grasp the concept of their inclusion in God's plan, begin a relationship with Christ if they did not already have one, and become a part of the outworking of God's plan through their partnership with a local church. I also hoped that my curriculum could be used to enable a prospective member, with previous church experience, to understand the essentials necessary to thrive as a Christ-follower at ABC. Information provided by class attendees through a pre-class survey allowed me to anticipate potential issues attendees may have had and be prepared to offer clarification. This curriculum was supplemented with six video sessions for those who could not attend.

¹ See appendix 3.

² "Connecting with Newcomers Survey," accessed July 27, 2020, <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdyTvqAQpCzTGPai7rxRVGDsF9OOout87AITXAJXdpYu0NNcCQ/viewform>.

³ See appendix 3.

Assembling Resources for a New Member Class Curriculum

The development of a six-week new member class curriculum required an extensive amount of time; therefore, it was necessary to begin work on this part of the project first. This process also began on week 1 of the thirty-three weeks planned for this project, and long before the launch of the new member class. I needed a wide array of resources at my disposal, so I began assembling the elements to design the new members course. While I expected creating a curriculum for new members would be an arduous task, I underestimated the amount of work involved. Nevertheless, I was passionate about developing a course that would form a bedrock of biblical basics upon which new members could build their lives and ministry along with other believers in their local church.

Before I began to write, my research began by gathering every available resource at my disposal for the development of the new member class. Over a period of more than thirty years of ministry, I had built a sizeable file of information for new believers and new members. I also had samples of some new member courses from various churches as well as assorted books in my personal library from which to draw. My research benefited from a wide variety of resources, many of which are included in the bibliography.

Although a few examples of new member training material already existed, I desired to write my own curriculum.⁴ It was important to ensure the curriculum could help seekers evaluate their relationship with Christ, begin to grasp the concept of their inclusion in God's plan, begin a relationship with Christ, if they did not already have one, and become a part of the outworking of God's plan through their partnership with a local church. It was also hoped my curriculum could be used to enable a prospective member, who had previous experience in a church, to understand the essentials necessary to enable them to thrive as a Christ-follower at ABC. This curriculum was supplemented with six video sessions for those who could not attend.

⁴ See appendix 5.

Developing a New Members Course

Writing began with developing an outline by which I could follow. The outline helped me focus on the essentials necessary for new believers and new members. While the course could not take the place of a lifetime of discipleship, it would hopefully provide the infrastructure for new members to build upon. Therefore, I began to prioritize the biblical principles the church holds dear; I began with soteriology.

The new members course was divided into two parts. I entitled the first part of the course “Discovering Discipleship” with the first session titled, “God’s Purpose for Your Life.” Aware of the fact that unregenerate members likely attend each church and the course would attract seekers who are unfamiliar with the gospel, I desired to begin the course with a broad introduction to God’s purpose for mankind and His plan of redemption. I sought to prepare this session in such a way that by its close, not only would those in attendance understand the gospel, but they also would accurately assess the status of their relationship with God and, if necessary, choose to be reconciled to Christ. On week 1, I began writing session 1. Each session of the new members course required ongoing writing and revising based on expert evaluations made during weeks 22-24. The student guide was sent to Lawing on week 24 to be printed for the new members course.

In hopes that all in attendance were assured of their salvation after session 1, I decided to present a simple lesson on what it means to be a follower of Christ or a disciple for session 2. This session was entitled, “God’s Purpose through Your Life.” I am convinced that many people in churches do not understand the essence of the Christian life, a vital, growing relationship with Christ that involves participation in His mission (Matt 28:18-20). This is especially true of churches in need of revitalization. These elementary aspects of being a Christian have long been taken for granted in many places, resulting in members who do not know the purpose and priorities Christ assigned His followers (Heb 5:12). This lack of purpose and focus has only facilitated division among members in its various forms and further diluted the mission of the church.

In the third session, “God’s Precepts for Your Life,” I addressed the next important topic church members should grasp—the nature and reliability of the Bible. The course was intentionally built upon the teachings of Scripture, so it was essential for the class to accept the Bible’s authority for faith and practice. In addition to my own personal experience, research reveals that Americans are not proficient in Bible knowledge. This lack of biblical knowledge among Americans is true even though Barna Research indicates that “six in 10 Americans believe the Bible has transformed their lives.”⁵ The same report indicates, “Bible centeredness is decreasing and skepticism is growing.”⁶ The State of the Bible 2020 was released in July of 2020 and revealed Bible reading had actually declined during the COVID pandemic.⁷ “The State of the Bible” report is based on research by The American Bible Society and The Barna Group. With this newly released research in hand, David Roach of *Christianity Today* reports, “Between early 2019 and 2020, the percentage of US adults who say they use the Bible daily dropped from 14 percent to 9 percent.”⁸ Therefore, it should not be presumed that those who seek to join a church believe the Bible.

With the first three sessions’ non-negotiable essentials as a backdrop, I chose to concentrate the last three sessions on vital matters related to church practice. The second part of the new members course was entitled “Developing Disciples.” I wrote session 4, “God’s People with Purpose,” to provide an overview of the essentials of

⁵ Barna Group, “State of the Bible 2019: Trends in Engagement,” April 18, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-bible-2019/>.

⁶ Barna Group, “State of the Bible 2019.”

⁷ American Bible Society, “American Bible Society Releases 10th Annual ‘State of the Bible Survey,’” July 22, 2020, <https://news.americanbible.org/blog/entry/corporate-blog/american-bible-society-releases-10th-annual-state-of-the-bible-survey>.

⁸ David Roach, “Bible Reading Drops during Social Distancing,” *Christianity Today*, July 22, 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/july/state-of-bible-reading-coronavirus-barna-abs.html?utm_source=leadership-html&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=18983340&utm_content=724661703&utm_campaign=email.

church life. My own anecdotal experiences led me to believe those subjects that may appear to be common knowledge for church members are often revealed to be vague and misunderstood upon closer inspection. As I developed the course outline for this session on ecclesiology, I included biblical teaching on the church's origin, meaning, ownership, membership, and leadership.

Among each church I have led, a considerable segment of the membership has appeared to believe it sufficient to keep the teachings of the Bible in the abstract. Knowing this, I ensured that the final two sessions of the new members course stressed that God's Word was not given as theoretical principles to ponder, but practical expressions of a life following Christ (2 Tim 3:16; Jas 1:22-25). Session 5 was entitled "God's People in Action," and provided an introduction to five practical aspects of the Christian life: loving God, loving others, observing the ordinances, practicing church discipline, and using spiritual gifts. I also included an introduction to the pastor and staff at ABC as well as ABC's mission statement.

The final session stressed the importance of faithfulness to Christ and His church and the preservation of biblical unity. Session 6 was titled "The Power of Unity." To provide a clear picture of God's work through His people in a local church, this session stressed "partnership in the gospel" (Phil 1:5). The conclusion asked participants, "What is your next step?," which included a challenge for each class member to find his or her place in a small group and a ministry. I reiterated that God has a purpose for each person in His plan and He wants to work through them to make and multiply disciples (2 Tim 2:2).

I chose the title of "Following Christ with My Church" as the title most suited for the curriculum. The contents of the curriculum emphasized knowledge and then practice. It was important for class participants to begin to grasp the "10,000-foot view" before delving into the details and application of what it meant to follow Christ with fellow believers. With an appreciation for God's love and His sovereign plan for

mankind, seekers or new believers should begin to see their lives as one of purpose. To supplement the six-session curriculum, I designed a leader's guide with introductory material, a planning timeline, and supplemental materials for each session.

Refining a New Members Course with the Critique of Experts

I was fortunate to have several respected leaders, who are experts in their fields, critique and return evaluations of the new members curriculum.⁹ I reached out to each of them in week 18 with an email inviting them to lend me their insight to improve upon what I had written.¹⁰ Those who agreed to provide an evaluation were sent a copy in a return email with my appreciation. After three weeks, those who had not returned their evaluations were sent a follow-up email. In this message, I thanked them again and informed them I was making changes to the curriculum and would like to include their evaluations.¹¹ The expert panel consisted of Freddie Cardoza (Dean of Grace Theological Seminary), Thomas Hammond (Executive Director of the Georgia Baptist Mission Board), Johnny Hunt (Assistant Vice-President of Evangelism and Pastoral Leadership at the North American Mission Board), Hal Mayer (Executive Pastor at Church at the Springs in Ocala, Florida), Frankie Melton (Pastor of Heath Springs Baptist Church in Heath Springs, South Carolina and Assistant Professor of Christian Studies at North Greenville University), Jerry Pipes (President of Pipes Productions), and Jerry Sosebee (Director of Church Strategies for the South Carolina Baptist Convention).

When evaluations and comments from these men began to arrive, I started the process of editing and revising the curriculum in week 20. To express my gratitude to these leaders for their time, each received a gift card along with a note of appreciation. After

⁹ See appendix 13.

¹⁰ See appendix 11.

¹¹ See appendix 12.

leading the people of ABC through the material, I made additional edits and gave a copy to Lawing. He plans to use it for subsequent new member training in the future. The process of writing and editing the curriculum for a new member class was the most challenging part of the project. Admittedly, it required more effort than I had anticipated and spanned weeks 1 through week 23. Nevertheless, when evaluated by a panel of experts and refined, I found it gratifying to have curriculum that I believed would be effective.

The Exploration Phase

Soon after beginning to write the curriculum for the new member class, I found that to complete my project, it was necessary to include an unanticipated additional step. A project must have a church or ministry upon which it is based. I had recently completed the work God gave me at Pebble Creek and was no longer able to use it as the location for my project. I had been called to lead Pebble Creek, a small church in Taylors, South Carolina, three years earlier. Unfortunately, the fellowship experienced several challenges to the unity and growth of the church. Without going into great detail, I would describe the challenges as all-too-familiar issues that churches face today; discord sown by members with a different strategy, abuse of one of our teenagers by an adult volunteer, and even a painful degree of staff disloyalty. The church already faced challenges due to the small size of the congregation and lack of funds to renovate the facilities, as well as the lack of younger members to connect with the unchurched of their generation. Those inherent challenges combined with an increasing tide of issues made growth difficult and members began migrating to other churches.

Nevertheless, I knew God had called me to this church to ground it upon loving God, loving others, and making disciples. I refused to behave like a “hired hand” who abandons the flock when it is under attack (John 10:11-13). I was and still am deeply concerned with reaching future generations, so I began working at Starbucks and doing security at night. I had envisioned God raising up a younger leader I could disciple and to

whom I could eventually pass the baton of leadership. God answered our prayer for an increase in membership and resources for revitalization but in a way I had not expected. I learned of a group of believers eager to start a church under the leadership of Frank Page, a former local pastor who was president of the Southern Baptist Convention from 2006 to 2008, and president of the denomination's Executive Committee from 2010 to 2018. Upon hearing of this opportunity, I said it was an answer to prayer and encouraged the church family to accept Page and the new people as God's way to impact future generations. I happily stepped aside and received gracious expressions from the church family and our local director of missions, Randy Bradley.

It was then necessary to find a suitable church to conduct this project. I began to pray to find a church willing to allow me to conduct the project and gained approval from the doctoral office at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to change the location of my project providing I rewrote chapter 1. I recognized that such a church would be led by a pastor who viewed the project not only as helpful to me, but also of benefit to his church. The church would also have a leadership team and congregation willing to cooperate with the pastor and me throughout the study. The timing was also important. I urgently needed a host church, but having served as a pastor, I recognized that any pastor I approached would have to consider the Lord's timing before inviting me to conduct the project. However good a ministry or event may potentially be, if it does not fit with the overall need of the church at a particular time, a pastor would be wise to delay it until an appropriate time arises. Therefore, any church willing to participate in the project would also have to believe the timing of such a project supported the work God was already doing there.

Thankfully, God opened a door where a pastor and his people were not only open to participating in the study but eager for it to begin. Within weeks of Randy Bradley, the Director of Missions for the Three River Baptist Association, learning of my search for a church for the project, he had a conversation with Mark Lawing, pastor of

ABC. In that conversation, they discussed the needs of ABC and Bradley recommended that Lawing contact me. Lawing and I met for the first time on week 17, after starting to write the new member class curriculum. I was relieved to be able to conduct the project and began researching ABC and its context to rewrite my introduction.

Discovering that Lawing and ABC desired to improve their ability to make disciples and strengthen the church by building upon the foundation of a new member class was an answer to prayer and a major step in this exploratory phase. Still, much preliminary work was to be done before the project could begin. The first and most important step in this phase was getting to know Lawing. Although I needed to conduct my project, I could not lose sight of the fact that my first responsibility was to encourage and support the work of the pastor. As he shared his love for the people of ABC, as well as his vision and burden for the ministry at ABC, God began to create a bond between us through our “partnership in the gospel” (Phil 1:3). In subsequent meetings we discussed the needs of ABC, the scheduling of the project, and the preparation necessary for it to be a success. I provided him with a project overview containing an estimated timeline, which we used in our planning.

In the beginning of week 21, Lawing asked me to meet with his deacons and church council to introduce myself and share how this project would be a benefit for ABC and support their vision, specifically uniting the church around the Lord’s Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) and the establishment of a solid foundation for future discipling. Rather than promote myself or the class I was to lead, I reiterated what I had shared with the pastor, emphasizing the urgent need for churches to return to the work the Lord has called us to do. I stressed the importance of seeking God and responding to His leadership. I quoted Proverbs 21:31: “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD.” I solemnly explained that we may amass all known research in the field and apply the latest strategies to see the church unified and multiplying disciples, but nothing we could do would matter unless the Lord worked in our hearts and

the those of His people at ABC. After hearing these words, each person nodded in quiet agreement. Later, I learned from the pastor that they were moved and also shared our desire for God to work among us through the class. With their support, the class was scheduled to begin six Sundays later.

Next, Lawing and I believed it would be helpful for the people of ABC to meet the person the pastor had chosen to assist them. The pastor invited me to join them for worship and to introduce myself before I preached on week 25. The people had heard their pastor's vision several times, as well as other leaders in the church speaking in agreement with him, and now they were to hear from the person who would lead their study. Before I spoke, the pastor again outlined his passion and vision for the church and invited me to join him on the platform and introduce myself. I expressed my gratitude to them for their invitation and described the great need for churches across the Southern Baptist Convention to experience revitalization. I chose to preach a message entitled, "Recipe for a Fresh Start" from Joshua 3:1-5. Before I concluded, I reiterated the vision their pastor and I share for churches to be healthy, maturing, and multiplying into future generations. After having prayed and thoroughly discussed our plans, meeting with key leaders, and challenging the people at ABC, it was time to begin the next phase. The pastor and I went forward with confidence knowing that God had brought us together not only for my project, but more importantly, for His glory.

The Pre-Class Preparation Phase

With the approval and support of the pastor and others in leadership at ABC, I was excited to begin preparing to lead the new member class. For the project to flow smoothly and result in the building up of believers at ABC, several important parts needed to come together during a period I am calling the Pre-class Preparation Phase. These parts of the preparation phase included determining the most effective methods of connecting with guests, surveying area pastors to find what method of connecting with newcomers they have found most effective, and testing methods at ABC to determine effectiveness.

Discover Effective Methods for Connecting with Newcomers

The third goal of this project was to hold a six-week new member class attended by at least 25 percent of visitors who provided contact information. Since the pastor of ABC preferred not to ask guests for personal information until it could be done relationally after visitors had visited the church several times, no baseline was available from which to measure the number of newcomers who provided contact information. Therefore, I was unable to test various methods to determine which approach was the most effective. While these figures were not available and did not help me to discover what methods are most effective at connecting with newcomers, I fully appreciate and respect Lawing and the approach in which God is leading Him.

On week 21, in another effort to acquire data, I initiated contact with area pastors via email that included a link to my survey.¹² The email was sent to 110 pastors and church leaders within the Three Rivers Baptist Association to learn what methods of connecting with guests they have found effective. The simple survey was comprised of three questions regarding the collection of guest information, the methods currently used, and their efficacy, in addition to the respondent's email, name, position, and church name.¹³

After one week, I sent a follow-up email to those who had not responded. Of those invited to participate, only 6, or 5.45 percent, responded to the survey. The negligible results reduced the survey results to the degree that no reliable finding could be determined. The low response was disappointing and prevented me from gaining information that would be not only helpful to me, but potentially to area churches as well. The results of the few who did respond will be presented along with my conclusions in chapter 5.

¹² See appendix 3.

¹³ See appendix 2.

Logistical Preparation before Launching New Member Class

The final steps of preparation before the beginning of the class involved preparation of the people and preparation of the logistics. To prepare the people, Lawing promoted the class at each service and in the church bulletin. To further assist promotion as well as registration, I provided a commitment form by which members and newcomers could register for the course.¹⁴ I also had a promotional piece and an email invitation for his use.¹⁵ The pastor's reminders to pick up a form and register, as well as the placement of these forms in prominent places, such as the communion table, were fruitful. I chose not to use digital registration on the church's website or send an email to members with a link to register because, according to the pastor, the older people of ABC were generally not digitally savvy. With this fact in mind, I was unable to send digital invitations, follow-up reminders, or messages to those who missed a session during the course. Communication with church members was limited to announcements, personal conversations, and hard-copy media.

Among the logistics involved in preparing for the course was distribution of the pre-class survey, printing of student guides, testing video for use with PowerPoint, and arranging the venue. Most pre-class surveys were returned during the registration period and some were submitted on the first day of class. Lawing chose the large Family Life Center of the church for the venue due to its spaciousness. He also ensured student guides for the attendees were printed and bound. He asked that the student guides have answers included to reduce the stress on members. I thought this was wise considering the general age of church members and agreed. The traditional Sunday school hour was chosen as the most opportune time for the class. To create a welcoming environment, the church provided a light continental breakfast fifteen minutes before the start of each

¹⁴ See appendix 8.

¹⁵ See appendix 9 and 10.

session. With the support of the pastor and ABC members, preparation was complete and the new member class could begin.

Application Phase

On week 25 of my journey through this project, the pastor and I gathered with approximately 43 of his members and several guests for session 1 of Following Christ with My Church. The fourth goal was to increase the knowledge of meaningful church membership among participants at the new member class. Therefore, this project revolved around the teaching of a new member class. This fourth goal was measured by comparing the pre- and post-course surveys completed by class members.

Because of the enthusiastic support of the pastor and church leaders, quite a few members attended in addition to a few who were not yet members. On the first day of the class I was pleased to see 45 smiling faces eager to begin the study. Each participant received a copy of the student's guide to follow along and make notes each week. Each week, the pastor would solicit prayer requests and lead in prayer before introducing me. Class participation was important to Lawing as he sought unity around ABC's values and vision.

My tools included my MacBook, a Bluetooth remote, and a large screen video monitor. I used a PowerPoint presentation to support each session. I was able to easily use the PowerPoint program on my computer screen alongside the Word document containing the leader's guide. Throughout the six sessions attendance was good and although participants were nearly 20 feet from me and seated at tables spread in a semi-circle arrangement, most appeared to be attentively following along with me.

This brings me to the fifth and final goal, which had two objectives. The fifth goal was for 80 percent of those completing the new member class to join a small group and 75 percent of those completing it and becoming a church member to begin participating in a ministry at ABC. Small group and ministry involvement with other members would then deepen their relationships with church members and one another.

These relationships facilitate opportunities for further discipleship, which would equip them to have a greater impact for Christ through their church. The pastor allowed me to extend the course as needed to complete the curriculum. On week 31, the seventh meeting and final Sunday of the class, I distributed post-class surveys and collected them after they were completed. I had prepared a follow-up email for the pastor to use, but participants preferred not to use email.¹⁶ Weeks 32 and 33 were spent compiling, analyzing, and evaluating the data. In this final session, as in previous sessions, I encouraged those who were not already members to speak to the pastor, and those seeking a small group or a place of ministry to do the same.

Conclusion

The phases described in this chapter revealed the course of action taken to establish a new member assimilation process at ABC through the accomplishment of five goals. These five goals encapsulated ABC's mission statement: "Airport Baptist Church's mission is to love God and Worship Him as we Reach and Disciple Others for Christ." For ABC to make progress toward the fulfillment of its mission, the church must be unified around Christ, the teachings of Scripture, and His commission for the church (Matt 28:18-20). Through the teaching of the new member course, "Following Christ with My Church," it has been my hope the members of ABC would experience a reset in their understanding of and commitment to Christ's purpose for His church as revealed in Scripture. Under the leadership of their pastor, Airport Baptist Church has committed to requiring all those seeking membership in the church in the future to successfully complete this course in order to guard the unity of the church and form a foundation for future growth. The process of attempting to reach the goals and establish this new member assimilation process has been described and the following chapter will reveal the results.

¹⁶ See appendix 11.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

In 1998, Thom Rainer, then Dean of the Billy Graham School of Evangelism, Missions, and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, contacted me and asked me to participate in a survey he was conducting.¹ At the time, I was the pastor of Ten Mile Creek Baptist Church in Baxley, Georgia, and was grateful to learn we were among the 4 percent of Southern Baptist Churches to meet his criteria for an “evangelistic church” with a high retention rate.² I was then invited to attend a dinner in Louisville at SBTS where I would be recognized along with other pastors whom God had blessed with church growth resulting in effective assimilation. At this event God gave me a vision of earning a doctorate at SBTS to lead churches to greater productivity in reaching people with the gospel and growing them as disciples.

Every seminar and assignment in this process brought me closer to the opportunity to conduct the ministry project described in this project. The enriching studies are past, and my project has been completed. Now, my attempt to establish an assimilation process at Airport Baptist Church in Greer, South Carolina, must be evaluated. In this chapter, the purpose of the project will be evaluated and then each goal will be reviewed, appraised, and the results will be revealed. The strengths as well as the

¹ The study focused on churches that reached and baptized at least 26 members and had a “baptismal ratio (resident members to total baptisms) of less than 20:1” and therefore, were considered “evangelistic.” Of the evangelistic churches in the study, Rainer “looked at the total number of people added to the church each year and how those additions affected the Sunday School attendance the following year.” One of Rainer’s team members said, “We need to study those churches that are reaching them and keeping them.” Thom Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: B & H, 1999), 6-7, Kindle.

² Rainer, *High Expectations*, 6.

weaknesses of the project, along with how I would do things differently were I to do it again, will be laid out. Then I will provide an overview of my theological and personal reflections on this project. Before delving into the specifics of the project, it will be helpful to evaluate the purpose of the project to understand the impetus for undertaking such a project.

Evaluation of the Project Purpose

From the beginning, the driving purpose of this project was to establish a new member assimilation process at Airport Baptist Church in Greer, South Carolina. The purpose of this project is a part of a compelling vision that first ignited this project and has fueled its progress to completion.

I envision a healthy, maturing, and multiplying church, and an assimilation process is essential for this to be realized. This vision is supported by Scripture and faith in the sovereign power of God. One may see healthy churches growing in grace with the number of disciples increasing in the New Testament, as well as throughout history, and in many places today. Because of the tendency of believers to forget, and the fog of spiritual warfare that may exist, church members must remember that Jesus, the Head of the church, has called believers to be His “climbing companions” (Matt 5:1-2 MSG). Only as His followers climb with Him, may they see between the valleys clouded by a fallen world, a vista of peaks beginning at Pentecost, continuing throughout church history, and evident even today. These high points provide hope to keep climbing until His followers realize the vision at His return.

While the purpose of this project was inspired by vision, it was framed by the practical outworking of the Great Commandments and the Great Commission (Mark 12:30-31; Matt 28:18-20). Simply put, the blueprints for the church Christ is building and of which He is the Cornerstone reveal His Master design. By His own words, Christ indicated the church He is building is based on Him and comprised of followers who, at their best, love God and one another, and, as a result, are multiplying disciples (Matt 16:16-

18). None of these things are possible without relationships, and it is precisely at this point that assimilating new members becomes a necessity. Therefore, the purpose of establishing an assimilation process at Airport Baptist Church of Greer, South Carolina, is dependent upon the grace of God and worthy of every effort for the glory of God. Gratefully, Airport Baptist Church, under the leadership of their pastor, Mark Lawing, has chosen to require all prospective members to complete a new member course before becoming members and they have chosen my curriculum for future classes. A new member assimilation process has been established at ABC as a result of this project.

Evaluation of the Project Goals

A project of this importance required individual goals that would contribute to the successful establishment of Airport Baptist Church's assimilation process. Next, each goal shall be explored and evaluated in light of the purpose of this project.

Goal 1: The Challenge of Connecting

The first goal of this project was to find the most effective ways to gather personal contact information from guests in order to invite them to participate in ABC's new member class. One may presume it relatively easy to connect with a newcomer who has taken the initiative to attend a church. Yet, it is my experience that newcomers are slower to share personal information than in the past. Some may find it strange that many in modern society reveal their inmost thoughts and daily routines on social media, however intimate or trivial they may be, yet become much more guarded when a church asks for contact information. The challenge of connecting with newcomers has always called for churches to seek the leadership of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, which is especially true today.

Scripture teaches, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed" (Prov 15:22); therefore, I sought out 110 area pastors within the Three Rivers Baptist Association (TRBA) to gain wisdom as to what methods they found to be most

effective in connecting with newcomers. I developed a survey for these pastors using Google Forms.³ The survey was comprised of three questions in addition to asking for their name and email address, and the name of their church. A link to this survey was included in an email I sent to these pastors and church leaders. After one week, I sent a follow-up email to those who had not responded.

In all, only six pastors responded and completed the survey. While I was glad to have their input, a response of only 5.45 percent of TRBA pastors eliminated broad-based findings that could have proven helpful to ABC, as well as other churches. Without better results, any trial I was to attempt at various methods at ABC would be limited to guesswork. I soon discovered the poor survey response was not going to interfere with this portion of the study.

Had it been possible for me to have gathered comprehensive results from area pastors, I still would have been unable to test and apply other methods. Lawing preferred to continue to use his approach of connecting with newcomers. Earlier, I stressed the importance of depending on the leadership of the Holy Spirit and wisdom and this is what Lawing did. He did not believe God's Spirit was leading him to experiment with new methods. He used his God-given wisdom and based his decision upon the size and culture of his congregation. Therefore, we did not ask guests to formally respond with personal information by using any of several possible methods. Instead, the pastor chose to continue what he found to be the most effective—personal relationships. When a newcomer attends ABC, Lawing attempts to build a rapport with each newcomer in a casual, friendly way. As these visitors return, he continues to work toward developing a relationship. Only when he feels asking for contact information will be natural and well-received does he inquire.

³ See appendix 2.

No doubt, the size of the ABC makes it possible for Lawing to notice newcomers and take steps to meet each one. While one person could not be expected to meet every newcomer in a larger church, the method preferred at ABC is feasible largely due to the size of the church and the efforts of the pastor. One might believe intuitively that Lawing's approach is more inclined to create real connections. Ultimately, a sincere, personal approach is more natural and likely more effective in connecting with newcomers and establishing lasting relationships. The hurdle some churches may face as their numbers increase is the need for members to develop an instinct to care, awareness to recognize, and a willingness to personally get to know newcomers. Believers should aspire to show love and hospitality to others and it should not be too much of a leap to expect it, as reaching out to others is a tangible expression of loving neighbors (Lev 19:18; Rom 13:9).

Lawing and several of his church members expressed their love for newcomers and took the initiative to give them a personal welcome. Therefore, even though it was not possible to discover and test various methods of overcoming the challenge of connecting, it appears Lawing's personal approach in the context of ABC would be the most effective at this time. I would recommend a "both-and" approach where members are intentional about displaying hospitality to newcomers and, at the same time, provide other avenues whereby guests may connect with the church if they wish. The first goal was meant to test various methods and use the most effective method. Due to the low response of area pastors and Lawing's confidence that his method was the most effective, I was unable to accomplish this goal. As I will describe later, I do believe Lawing's approach to be the most effective as it is based on personal relationships.

Goal 2: The Creation of Curriculum

The second goal was to write a six-session curriculum for the membership class with supplemental video to provide the essential information and encouragement necessary to enable a prospective member to follow Christ as an active part of ABC. This goal was also essential to establishing an assimilation process at ABC. This goal required

me to write a six-session curriculum for the membership class with supplemental video to provide the basic information and encouragement necessary to enable a prospective member to follow Christ as an active part of ABC.

Some might say that all churches desire to assimilate newcomers into their fellowship who share the church's beliefs, unite around the church's mission, and join hands in a true "partnership of the gospel" (Phil 1:5). However, unfortunately, not all churches appear to be aware of their own responsibility in this process. While everything about the church is dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit, the church must follow His leadership and take practical steps if healthy, maturing, and multiplying disciples are to be the fruit. While there is no substitute for personal discipling relationships, a new members class is a powerful resource for the church. A successful class calls for an authentic, enthusiastic, caring, and knowledgeable facilitator, but a dynamic leader notwithstanding, unless the content he or she teaches contains a clear introduction to the essentials of the faith and the partnership of believers within a church, its impact will be shallow at best. Therefore, the preparation of this type of resource was vital for the assimilation process of ABC.

Even though I had taught new member classes for years and collected a large number of resources, I found that creating the curriculum for ABC's new members class was no small challenge. The task involved compiling the needed information in a format that would capture the attention of those with whom the Bible is unfamiliar as well as keep the attention of those with previous ministry experience. It had to contain necessary doctrine and lead to a practical application. Once I completed the writing process described in the previous chapter, I realized it was inadequate without the inclusion of a leader's guide. Lawing, or whoever leads the class in the future, should have access to guidance, support, and suggestions by way of corollary material.

Once the curriculum containing the leader's guide was complete, I compiled a list of 46 friends and colleagues from which to choose experts to evaluate the new members

class material. Unsure as to how many would be willing and able to help, I chose 12. I sent emails describing my work and soliciting their help. Of the 12, only 2 said they were unable to assist. The remaining 10 agreed to help and asked for the curriculum. Of these, 4 responded using the rubric provided to detail their evaluations, 2 replied with endorsements, and 4 had not returned their evaluations by the conclusion of the project. While all responded graciously, only one third returned completed rubrics along with detailed critiques of each session. The 4 who returned evaluations offered encouraging comments and helpful suggestions as well. Their contributions to the new member curriculum were invaluable.

I created a student's guide from the leader's guide with blanks in place of keywords. I omitted key words to encourage those in attendance to follow closely and fill in the missing words. Out of concern for his elderly members, Lawing asked me to provide a completed student's guide for the class rather than one with information missing. I appreciated the love and thoughtfulness he expressed toward his members and especially his senior adults, as in this instance.

In addition to the written material, I prepared a PowerPoint presentation and a teaching video for each session. I used the PowerPoint while leading the class and had the video available for any who wished to have a summary of a session they missed or as a review. Preparing the curriculum for the new members class was the second goal of the project and required far more effort than I had anticipated. When it was complete, I was gratified to find it helpful when leading the class and that Lawing had chosen to use it as the basis for future new member training classes at ABC. This second goal of creating curriculum to teach new members directly contributed toward assimilating members at ABC. This goal was accomplished, and the curriculum will be used by ABC in future new member classes. The results of the class will be discussed under the fourth goal.

Goal 3: Conducting the Class

The third goal of this project was to hold a six-week new member class attended by at least 25 percent of visitors who provided contact information. The class began Sunday morning on the 25th week of the project, during the time ABC's Sunday School was normally meeting. By this time, the curriculum had been written, attempts had been made to discover methods of connecting with newcomers that local pastors found productive, I had accepted the pastor's preferred method of building relationships with visitors, and most had completed the pre-class survey. I asked participants taking the pre-class survey, as well as those taking the post-class survey, to place their name or a personal identification number (PIN) on their surveys so they could be compared. The new members class content was the guide leading newcomers to membership and assimilation and the glue of beliefs and practices uniting the church for fruitful ministry. In six weeks, I was to learn what, if any, growth in knowledge the class had experienced.

As a result of Lawing's leadership, class attendance was very good. After learning of the importance of a regenerate membership unified around the message and mission of the church, the deacons and yokefellows of ABC voted to require all those seeking membership in the future to complete the new members class as well as commit to attending Sunday school. According to the bylaws of ABC, the deacons and yokefellows have sole authority determining who is an active or inactive member.⁴ Fortunately, Lawing needed no convincing as to the importance of church membership sharing the same vision and the ministries of the church aligning around the purpose of the church. The new members class provided an excellent opportunity to establish unity and strengthen the church around a simple, biblical model. By every indication, the membership of ABC as well as guests were moved by the importance placed on the class by the pastor and church leaders. Eight newcomers signed up to attend the class.

⁴ Bylaws of Airport Baptist Church, Article I, Section 5, ratified December 11, 2016.

Because I had invested a great deal of time in writing the curriculum, I was very familiar with it. My familiarity with the subject, along with my conviction as to the importance of assimilation for discipleship, enabled me to teach with passion and build momentum as I segued from one session to the next.

After the class I provided the surveys and asked attendees to complete it as they did the pre-class survey and include either their name or personal identification number as they did on the first survey. Unfortunately, participants only returned 10 surveys following the class. I included in both pre- and post-class surveys a request for either the participant's name or a personal identification number so I could measure any post-class change. Of the 10 surveys returned after the class, I eliminated 1 because there was not a corresponding pre-class survey by which I could compare it. Then, using their names or PIN, I matched the remaining 9 with pre-class surveys for comparison.

The small number of post-class surveys returned amounted to only 21 percent of the total surveys administered before the class began. I was disappointed in the small number of post-class surveys that made a thorough evaluation of the class impossible. Therefore, I considered the 9 post-class surveys a sampling and launched an investigation to learn what I could. The poor post-class survey response was preventable had I been able to conclude the classes in six sessions as I had planned. In a later portion of this evaluation entitled, "Project Deficiencies and Modifications," I will go into more detail as to my errors and what I could have done differently. The third goal required teaching the curriculum I had written and exposing newcomers to these biblical teachings is necessary for assimilation. I used the curriculum successfully to lead ABC's new member class and this third goal was reached.

Goal 4: Contributing to the Knowledge of the Class

The fourth goal of this project was to increase the knowledge of meaningful church membership among participants at the new member class. The curriculum had

been written and taught, but I needed to determine whether it was effective. To measure the effectiveness of the curriculum, I began by doing a study of the pre-class surveys by noting the percentages of each statement's response using the Likert scale. Unfortunately, with so few post-class responses, I could not perform a *t*-test. Nevertheless, I could still discern the general knowledge of the class on the subjects represented by the 25 statements. The results of this study are organized below in fifteen categories: Conversion and Devotional Life, Personal Evangelism, Attendance: Church and Small Groups, Commitment to the Bible, Salvation by Grace, Exclusivity of Christ, Stewardship, Church Leadership, Spiritual Gifts, Conflict Resolution, Eternal Security, The SBC, Worship, The Mission of the Church, and Christian Maturity.

The results of the nine post-class surveys will be described and compared following a description of the pre-class results using simple percentages. I evaluated both surveys by the percentage of participants completing them, then compared them to one another to gain a general impression of knowledge before and after the class. I found the comparison of the 43 pre-class surveys with the 9 post-class surveys somewhat interesting, but no truly defining conclusions could be made. The students participating in the post-class survey were too few to consider a fair sampling of the total pre-class surveys.

I had hoped that any deficiencies in biblical theology would be revealed in the pre-class survey and resolved by the conclusion of the class. The pre- and post-class surveys were identical and contained 25 statements with a Likert Scale, by which participants could indicate their views in response to each statement. The scale ranged from "Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Disagree Somewhat, Agree Somewhat, Agree," to "Strongly Agree." I will reveal the results of the two surveys under the fifteen categories described previously. If members are to be fully assimilated into ABC, they must share the biblical beliefs upon which the mission and purpose of the church is founded, so this goal is irreplaceable to the purpose of this project.

Conversion and devotional life. The first 2 statements were personal, and I included them to reveal whether the respondents had “made a life-changing commitment to receive Christ” and were “committed to seeking God daily through Scripture reading and prayer.”⁵ The 23 remaining statements were related to subjects such as personal evangelism, church attendance, the Bible, baptism, small groups, exclusivity of Christ for salvation, church leadership, spiritual gifts, conflict resolution, Southern Baptists, worship, eternal security, spiritual growth, and glorifying God.

Pre-class survey results began with a strong start on the subjects of participants’ salvation and prayer life. Overall, the 43 pre-class surveys returned indicated that they not only believed they were saved but most were in prayer and reading His Word almost daily as well. A full 89 percent of attendees agreed strongly with the statement, “I have made a life-changing commitment to receive Christ as my Savior and follow Him.” Of the remaining 11 percent, all indicated they agreed. Similarly, out of 43 pre-class surveys, only 5 agreed somewhat with the statement, “I am committed to daily seeking God through Scripture reading and prayer,” while the rest either agreed or strongly agreed.

The nine post-class surveys indicated a 12 percent improvement on the subject of conversion. All respondents said they strongly agreed with the statement, “I have made a life-changing commitment to receive Christ as my Savior and follow Him,” while 9 percent strongly agreed with the statement regarding prayer and Scripture reading and 3 percent agreed with the statement. Again, definitive results cannot be attained due to the small number of post-class surveys. The simple percentages reported here offer limited comparison with the pre-class surveys.

Personal evangelism. On the subject of personal evangelism, 76 percent of pre-class surveys strongly agreed with the statement, “All Christ-followers are to bring Him glory by helping others to follow Him.” Thirteen percent simply agreed and 11

⁵ Statements 1 and 2 of New Member Class Pre- and Post-Survey.

percent indicated they “agree somewhat” with the statement. Another statement relating to personal evangelism was, “An indication of spiritual growth is one’s focus on God and desire to help others to follow Christ.” The pre-class response to this statement mirrored the responses to the earlier statement on personal evangelism. The same 76 percent agreed strongly with the statement, while 18 percent simply agreed. One person (2 percent of the total participants) indicated that they “disagreed somewhat” with the statement. These are heartening figures and indicate that a large majority may, at the very least, know they should help others to follow Christ.

The post-class survey revealed a 4 percent increase in those who strongly agreed with the statement that “all Christ-followers are to bring Him glory by helping others to follow Him.” The second statement concerning personal evangelism had a mixed response. Those who agreed with this statement in the post-class survey had a 39 percent increase over the pre-class survey respondents. Yet, those responding “strongly agree” to the statement were 30 percent less.

Attendance: church and small groups. Two of the survey statements intended to reveal participants’ commitment to attending church and small groups. In the pre-class survey, 80 percent strongly believed, “It is important for Christ-followers to faithfully attend and support a local church.” The remaining 20 percent of respondents also agreed, only not strongly. The statement regarding small groups brought a more varied response: “I believe God wants His followers today to grow like His first followers by gathering regularly in small groups for study, prayer, and encouragement.” I phrased it positively to show a connection between small groups and the first followers of Christ. Since I slanted the statement toward a positive response, I fully expected 100 percent to choose “strongly agree,” yet only 42 percent held this view. The remaining responses to this statement were in agreement, but without as much confidence: 36 percent agreed and 18 percent agreed somewhat. These results appear to show that a little more than half of the respondents do not strongly believe members should gather in small groups as the early

disciples. Still, pre-pandemic figures indicate strong support for small groups as 85 percent of ABC membership attended Sunday School. Since the pandemic, when the church began to regather, attendance has experienced a 15 percent decline and averaged 70 percent of total church membership. It began to appear to me that either some church members were more committed to small groups than they knew, or what may be a more likely explanation, the term “small groups” may not have been equated with Sunday school. If misunderstanding my terminology was the case, it should not be altogether surprising. People may easily misunderstand the terminology of different generations, cultures, and contexts. From my anecdotal experience while at ABC, Sunday school seems well attended. The age of those in attendance was 55 to 85, and are generations likely, from my experience, to have experienced strong expectations to attend Sunday school as children.

Commitment to the Bible. When the pre-class respondents came to the statement, “The Bible is God’s word and is true, trustworthy, reliable, accurate, and powerful,” 93 percent strongly agreed. The other 7 percent simply agreed with the statement. Once again, one may detect the possibility that participants have strong ties to traditional Baptist beliefs.

Following the new members class, there was no ambiguity among the respondents when it came to the statement about the Bible being “true, trustworthy, reliable, accurate, and powerful.” One hundred percent strongly agreed with the statement, which is a 19 percent increase in those who strongly believed before the class.

Salvation by grace. The biblical doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone has been long held by Baptists. One might be prone to presume all Baptists, particularly Southern Baptists, strongly agree that no effort on man’s part is capable of providing salvation. Those who make this presumption will unfortunately find themselves disappointed. The simple statement included in this survey was, “Baptism is necessary

for sins to be washed away.” It is a straightforward statement with which 15 percent of those in the new members class agreed and 21 percent went so far as to strongly agree. Of those disagreeing with the unorthodox statement, 35 percent strongly disagreed, 18 percent disagreed, and 12 percent disagreed somewhat. So, at the very least it may be said that 65 percent were unable to disagree strongly with a heretical statement. While surprising, this finding is not reported to disparage the good people of ABC, but only to spotlight an area of need. The 9 post-class surveys returned at the conclusion of the course hint at whether a small portion of these pre-survey numbers showed an increase in knowledge resulting in a correction of an unbiblical belief.

Following the new members class, overall responses to the post-class survey were not as clear-cut as had been hoped. The statement on baptism was so blatantly unbiblical, the only response it should have brought is, “Disagree Strongly.” Yet none selected that response in the post-class survey. Of respondents, 33 percent selected simply “disagree,” another 33 percent responded, “Disagree Somewhat.” Shockingly, another 33 percent actually chose “Strongly Agree.”

If one divides the pre- and post-class responses between the “Disagree” and “Agree” sides, 66 percent of the post-class survey disagreed with the statement, yet not “strongly.” Compared to 66 percent of the pre-class survey, which did have 35 percent who “disagreed strongly.” Seeing as how the purpose of biblical baptism was clearly taught in class, one might hope participants simply misunderstood. Whatever the case, work must be done to clarify the membership’s understanding of baptism as a symbolic ordinance of the church.

Exclusivity of Christ. Another doctrine in which modern church members may err is the exclusivity of Christ, or the teaching that Christ is the only way of salvation. The first statement within the survey referring to this doctrine was, “There is no other way to have a relationship with God and enter Heaven when we die than through Jesus.” Thankfully, 81 percent of those participating in the pre-class survey strongly agreed and

16 percent simply indicated they agreed. But to my surprise, one respondent wrote “SD,” or strongly disagree, besides this statement.

This topic was approached in a different way through the statement, “There are many religions, but they all lead to the same God.” To this, 88 percent disagreed and of that number, 58 percent strongly disagreed. Those who viewed the statement positively enough to agree with it to some degree totaled 5 percent of respondents. While those with orthodox beliefs may find this response encouraging, it might do well to remember the centrality of Christ to God’s plan of salvation. For anyone to believe otherwise reveals a grossly inaccurate understanding of Scripture. Findings such as these may well indicate more church members of conservative Baptist churches have fallen prey to universalism or inclusivism than one may expect.

After the apparent confusion surrounding baptism, one may wonder if that confusion would continue with the post-class survey statements regarding Christ’s exclusivity. Everyone’s response to the first statement on this topic was the same. One hundred percent of the respondents “agreed strongly” with the statement, “There is no other way to have a relationship with God and enter heaven when we die than through Jesus.” Their strong response was quite an improvement over the pre-class survey where 81 percent strongly agreed, 16 percent agreed, and 2 percent even strongly disagreed.

The second statement used terminology frequently heard in today’s culture but was basically the same as the previous question about Christ’s exclusivity. Of the post-class respondents, 83 percent indicated that they disagreed with the statement, “There are many religions, but they all lead to the same God.” Fifty percent simply disagreed and 33 percent disagreed somewhat, but none strongly disagreed. Seventeen percent responded that they agreed with the statement. The results reveal the exclusivity of Christ and the universalism of world to be yet another teaching opportunity.

Stewardship. The statement regarding stewardship was, “I have committed to practice what the Bible teaches about joyfully and generously giving to God’s work

through my local church.” Some might consider this a “softball” statement—too obvious. The phrase, “what the Bible teaches,” should provide a clue for anyone with uncertainty as to how they should respond. After the responses of the previous two topics described above, it is heartening to know 70 percent of the pre-class respondents strongly agreed with the statement indicating they believe in giving to God’s work through the local church. One may wish the response would have been 100 percent, nevertheless, it is positive to note the remaining 30 percent also agreed, just not as enthusiastically.

The post-class survey results were not very dissimilar than in the first survey. Of those surveyed at the conclusion of the class, 67 percent strongly agreed and 33 percent agreed.

Church leadership. In the nearly forty years of my ministry in local churches, power struggles have almost been ubiquitous. Lack of clarity as to who has the authority to make decisions and the process whereby decisions are made may easily undermine the unity within a church. At ABC, 70 percent agreed strongly with the statement, “The pastor is the shepherd-leader of the local church,” while 28 percent agreed or agreed somewhat, and one disagreed somewhat. Past experiences, both good and bad, tend to influence views, so for example, even the one in disagreement may not be antagonistic but hold a biblical view of the plurality of elders. Clearly, this subject is not ambiguous to the people of ABC. Their understanding of biblical leadership is not only a credit to their previous Bible teachers but also likely an indication of the respect for Lawing’s genuineness and devotion to Christ.

The subject of church leadership was approached in a slightly different way with the statement, “Deacons are the ruling board of the local church.” This statement brought a mixture of responses. In varying degrees, 30 percent disagreed and 67 percent agreed. The fact that 16 percent strongly agreed and 51 percent agreed or agreed somewhat indicates the likelihood of uncertainty. The same may be said of the 12 percent who disagreed or disagreed somewhat. The positive responses to this statement seem to

contradict the statement above about the pastor being the shepherd-leader. It is not uncommon for church members to default to a business model when they have not been disciplined in their formative years as believers. Members' interpreting Scripture with secular glasses could be true of many other contemporary beliefs and practices within churches as well. In my experience, conflict and power struggles are rarely over matters as vital as the virgin birth but often over matters of personal preference. Without a clear understanding of leadership and the decision-making process, confusion is likely.

The largest difference between the pre-class survey and the post-class survey, on the statement of the pastor being the "shepherd-leader of the church," was found in the response of the 14 percent who disagreed somewhat after attending the class. The pre-class survey only had 2 percent who believed the same. The other post-class responses were not too unlike the first survey as 71 percent strongly agreed and 14 percent simply agreed.

Forty-three percent of post-class participants indicated that they strongly believed the role of deacons to be the "ruling board of the local church." Another 43 percent agreed and only 14 percent disagreed somewhat. The disparity in responses between the statement on the pastor as "shepherd-leader" and deacons being "the ruling board" within the post-class surveys again calls for further investigation and teaching to clarify the matter. On the confusion shown in these responses, Bill Henard, author of *Can These Bones Live?* told me he had a "sense that a lot of the confusion is generational—the older group would be less pastor-led and more deacon-led."⁶ Henard based his observations on what he believes was caused by inadequate teaching of theology in SBC churches, "especially to members coming from other denominations who hold to their old beliefs."⁷ Based on my own anecdotal experiences leading churches I would have to agree

⁶ Bill Henard, comment to author, August 24, 2020.

⁷ Henard, comment to author.

with his assessment and how those choosing a church appear to be less concerned with the theology of a church than they are with the relationships they may have at a church.

Spiritual gifts. I included four statements regarding spiritual gifts in the survey. Differing views on this subject have become a source of controversy within some churches. The first statement in this category was, “Spiritual gifts are only to be used to build up others.” The pre-class responses to this statement revealed a wide range of beliefs. Sixteen percent strongly agreed and the same percentage strongly disagreed. With those responses being equal, the scale tipped slightly in favor of those agreeing as 51 percent either agreed or agreed somewhat and 26 percent either disagreeing or disagreeing somewhat.

Another statement was, “I know what my spiritual gifts are.” Most pre-class respondents (74 percent) indicated that they agreed with this statement to some degree. While nearly 75 percent of participants tended to believe they knew their spiritual gifts, the fact that only 26 percent strongly agree with the statement shows the likelihood most have a level of uncertainty about their spiritual gifts.

Glossolalia was the bases for the final two statements on spiritual gifts. One statement was, “People who speak in ‘tongues’ in the Bible are speaking languages of others that they have not learned.” This statement intended to reveal whether those in the class understood the meaning of tongues from a biblical basis. Responses were almost evenly split between those who agreed or disagreed to varying degrees. While 16 percent strongly agreed, 13 percent strongly disagreed. Those who simply agreed comprised 21 percent of the total and those who disagreed 23 percent. The comparison between those who agreed or disagreed somewhat was almost the same.

A critical statement related to glossolalia was, “Speaking in ‘tongues’ is a sign of being saved.” An unbiblical response to this statement could be somewhat akin to believing in baptismal regeneration. It is alarming that 14 percent either agreed or agreed somewhat. While 44 percent strongly disagreed with the statement, every other response indicates a lack of certainty even if they disagreed or disagreed somewhat with the

statement. In all, 56 percent either agreed or lacked assurance that they knew the correct answer.

Post-class survey results on the purpose of spiritual gifts “only to be used to build up others” was not unlike the pre-class surveys. Only a few percentage points separated the responses. As to knowing their spiritual gifts, post-class respondents varied and again were similar to pre-class results.

When responding to a statement on the nature of tongues, “People who speak in ‘tongues’ in the Bible are speaking languages of others that they have not learned,” 40 percent strongly agreed; an improvement from the pre-class survey. The other responses to this statement were mixed with 40 percent disagreeing or disagreeing somewhat.

The statement, “Speaking in tongues is a sign of being saved,” resulted in all responding that they disagreed in varying degrees. Those strongly disagreeing during the post-class survey were 11 percent less than the pre-class survey. This statement is another topic that should be carefully explained to church members to remove any doubt as to what the Bible says about glossolalia.

Conflict resolution. The statement, “If someone offends me, I should ask others to pray for them” could easily mislead anyone who was not attentive and discerning. Some may say, “Of course, I should ask others to pray!” However well-intentioned this response may be, it is not what Scripture prescribes to be done when one is offended. Twenty-three percent presumably recognized the error and strongly disagreed, while 33 percent also disagreed, just not strongly. On the other hand, 37 percent agreed. A misconception as to the proper way to resolve conflict is like a ticking bomb. Unless church members know and follow Christ’s directions, gossip will spread and hurt feelings and dissension will be the result.

Compared to the pre-class survey, nearly twice as many (17 percent) in the post-class survey strongly agreed with the statement saying one’s response to offense is to ask others to pray. While that response is disappointing, when the post-survey responses

are taken as a whole, the results improve. If the six statements in the post-survey were split between “disagree” and “agree,” 83 percent disagree, as compared with 61 percent disagreeing in the pre-class survey. While the increase in the number disagreeing is encouraging, it brings to mind James’ description of what damage even a “small spark” can cause (Jas 3:5).

Eternal security. Perseverance of the saints is a topic that some church members find confusing and controversial. It refers to eternal security of the redeemed. Opponents to this doctrine choose to believe the statement, “Once a person is saved, they could turn away from Jesus and lose their salvation.” If one were to presume all Baptists hold to traditional beliefs regarding eternal security would be a mistake. A survey, like the one applied in this project, may bring differing views to the forefront, and reveal it to be suddenly controversial. Of those attending ABC’s new member class, a full 60 percent recognized the error of the statement and strongly disagreed. Thirty-three percent also disagreed and only 7 percent agreed as one participant was in strong agreement.

Post-survey respondents all disagreed with the statement regarding the ability of one who is saved to “turn away from Jesus and lose their salvation.” The biggest difference between those surveyed before the class and those surveyed after the class is seen in the degree of disagreement. Before the class, 60 percent strongly disagreed and 26 percent simply disagreed. After the class, only 17 percent strongly disagreed and 67 percent simply chose “disagree.” Another positive indicator is that 2 percent of the pre-class survey strongly agreed with the statement while none agreed at any level in the post-class survey.

As a reminder, it is important to note that the percentages used in the comparisons between pre- and post-class knowledge in this section offer limited information because too few post-class surveys were returned. I would caution against drawing hard and fast conclusions without further research.

The SBC. Two statements contained in the survey were related to attendees' understanding of the Southern Baptist Convention. The first was rather straightforward: "I know what the Southern Baptist Convention is and why Airport Baptist Church is a supporting member." While the survey did not delve into specifics about the SBC and one could easily feel confident in their knowledge while being ill-informed, the survey results suggested ABC members, for the most part, may be aware of the reason they are a part of the SBC. Twenty-six percent strongly agreed with the statement and more than 55 percent agreed or agreed somewhat. To simply agree or agree somewhat rather than strongly agree lends support to the possibility there is uncertainty among participants. Only 5 percent strongly disagreed and 14 percent disagreed or disagreed somewhat. With the largely positive response to this statement in mind, the next statement related to the SBC may shed more light on their actual knowledge.

The next statement addressed a central strategy for Southern Baptist mission support: "I understand what the Cooperative Program is and why it is important." Again, only 5 percent disagreed strongly, but the number disagreeing or disagreeing somewhat rose to 33 percent. Since the Cooperative Program is such an integral part of the SBC, this response may indicate participants knew less than they thought about the SBC. The same 26 percent represented in the previous statement also chose "Strongly Agree" here, but the number of those agreeing to a lesser degree dropped 22 percentage points to 33 percent. Those revealing their uncertainty in varying amounts between strongly agreeing and strongly disagreeing totaled 66 percent. The variance of responses here is another opportunity for class participants to show increase in their knowledge.

The few post-class respondents who returned their surveys failed to show improvement in their knowledge of the SBC and a full 67 percent disagreed with the statement, "I know what the Southern Baptist Convention is and why Airport Baptist Convention is a supporting member." Only 34 percent agreed. Insofar as their knowledge of the Cooperative Program, 80 percent disagreed with the statement and only 20 percent

agreed. Even though the 20 percent agreed strongly, the large majority of post-class respondents, by their admission, simply do not know about the Cooperative Program. Again, because of the inability to make a full comparison of pre- and post-class surveys, these results cannot be set in concrete.

Worship. The subject of worship is another area where church members may disagree and disagree strongly. Two statements were included in the survey on this subject. The first, “The purpose of worship services is to help everyone feel good,” carried with it a clue as to the biblical purpose of worship. I expected even those who may unwittingly judge a worship service by their subjective feelings to disagree with this statement and I was not disappointed. Forty-seven percent strongly disagreed, and another 44 percent disagreed or disagreed somewhat. Only 5 percent agreed strongly, and another 5 percent agreed or agreed somewhat. It may be that members who disagreed, but not strongly, sense there is something wrong with the purpose of worship being to make one feel good, yet still struggle with rating worship services by their feelings.

The second statement on worship would seem to call for an obvious response, “Worship that pleases God is based upon the Bible and focuses on glorifying Christ.” Unsurprisingly, a large majority (79 percent) strongly agreed. The fact that 19 percent simply “agreed” and 2 percent “disagreed somewhat” begs the question, “What other kind of worship would be pleasing to God?” The responses to this statement would make a good topic for a follow-up discussion to those who did not agree strongly.

After the new members class, survey results indicated improvement in the understanding of respondents in the area of worship, as 100 percent disagreed with the purpose of worship being “to help people feel good.” The pre-class survey revealed that 89 percent disagreed. “Worship that pleases God is based upon the Bible and focuses on glorifying Christ” also brought a strong response from the post-class group with 100 percent either agreeing or agreeing strongly.

Mission of the church. Only one statement dealt directly with the mission of the church, “The mission and purpose of the church is to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).” One might expect some to have a more nuanced expression of the church’s mission and purpose, but the inclusion of the Scripture reference was expected to simplify the statement. The pre-class response revealed 60 percent strongly agreed along with 33 percent indicating they were simply in agreement, but not strongly. So, the overwhelming majority appear to know the mission and purpose of the church or know this response was what would be expected. On the other hand, 2 percent strongly disagreed, and another 2 percent disagreed, but not strongly. When one sees the 4 percent in disagreement, a follow-up question similar to the one above may come to mind. Curiosity and concern may invite most to inquire as to why one would disagree strongly, as well as what alternative mission and purpose would they ascribe the church.

Unfortunately, after the class, those surveyed about the mission of the church indicated 33 percent disagreed that the “mission and purpose of the church is to fulfill the Lord’s Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20).” While 67 percent agreed with the statement, that figure still falls short of the pre-class response of 93 percent in agreement.

Christian maturity. It has long been my opinion that many church members appear to misjudge spiritual maturity. While I must not digress to explore the various reasons for my coming to this conclusion, I will say my experience with some church members compelled me to include two statements on spiritual maturity. The first, “The maturity of a Christian may be determined by how long they have been a Christian,” has been an unspoken principle among many church members with whom I have served. I was pleased to see that 40 percent strongly disagreed with this statement, another 40 percent indicated they simply disagreed, and 2 percent disagreed somewhat. Therefore, at least in theory, slightly more than 80 percent of the participants of this new members class recognized there is more to spiritual maturity than the number of years one has been

a Christian. Nine percent showed some uncertainty by choosing to agree somewhat while 4 percent agreed or strongly agreed.

A similar statement was phrased simply, “An indication of spiritual growth is one’s focus on God and desire to help others to follow Christ.” Unsurprisingly, all agreed in varying degrees. Forty-nine percent strongly agreed, 44 percent agreed, and 5 percent agreed somewhat.

When the class concluded, those responding to the statement equating Christian maturity with length of time as a Christian indicated that 100 percent disagreed in varying degrees: 33 percent strongly disagreed, 50 percent disagreed, and 17 percent disagreed somewhat. The fact they were not all in strong disagreement with the statement indicates further training would be helpful. The second statement regarding spiritual growth being indicated by “one’s focus on God and desire to help others follow Christ,” brought a slightly stronger response than the responses of the pre-class survey group, as 100 percent agreed or strongly agreed. Those who agreed to the statement increased 39 percent in the post-class group. Those who strongly agreed were 12 percent less than those in the pre-class group.

The fourth goal to contribute toward establishing a new member assimilation process at ABC was to increase the knowledge of meaningful church membership among participants at the new member class. As such, a comparison between the pre-class and post-class survey results intended to accurately depict an improvement in the accuracy of the responses. Due to the poor response of post-class surveys, a conclusive finding could not be reached. Any enthusiasm I may feel about positive indicators in the post-class survey must be tempered by that fact. Nevertheless, if members are to be fully assimilated into ABC, they must share the biblical beliefs upon which the mission and purpose of the church are founded, so increasing knowledge is irreplaceable to the purpose of this project. Ultimately, I cannot say that this goal was reached because the low responses to the post-class survey made it impossible to do an objective comparison.

Goal 5: Newcomer Next Steps—Small Groups, Membership, and Ministry

The final goal of this project was to have 80 percent of those completing the new member class joining a small group and 75 percent of those completing it and becoming church members and begin participating in a ministry at ABC. These steps may be considered tangible evidence a newcomer is beginning to assimilate.

From the beginning of the class, the pastor and I reminded those in attendance of the importance of Sunday school, joining the church, and getting plugged-into a place of ministry within the church. In the final session, I urged all attendees to talk to the pastor about these decisions.

I am grateful to report how the newcomers responded to the class and, more importantly, to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. First, of the approximate 43 who attended the new members class, 8, or 19 percent, were non-members. The participation of these non-members brings to mind Lawing's preferred method of connecting with guests. As described previously, he chooses to meet every newcomer and attempts to build a friendly connection with them. When he senses that he and the newcomer have a good rapport, he makes inquiries as to their contact information. By this time, the relationship between the pastor and the guest has been built, making it relatively easy to encourage them to participate in ABC's new member class. The fact that 8 newcomers, that is 7 percent of the church membership, chose to attend the new members class is a strong indication that God is blessing the pastor's efforts to connect with newcomers.

The first part of the final goal was to have 80 percent of those completing the new member class joining a small group. I am delighted to report that, following the class, 100 percent chose to join a Sunday school class, which is the equivalent of a small group at ABC. While I would like to believe the class curriculum and my leadership influenced them to join a class, the truth is that without their warm relationship with their caring pastor and other members, they may not have attended the new members class at

all. The effect of their personal with the pastor and other church members is another strong reminder of the importance of relationships in assimilation that results in discipleship.

The final goal's second part was to have 75 percent of the newcomers completing the new member class become church members and begin participating in a ministry at ABC. The goal of 75 percent becoming church members was achieved as out of the 8 newcomers attending, 6 became members. As far as newcomers who became members participating in ministry, 2 of the 6, or 33 percent had found places of ministry at the time of this writing. By God's grace and the loving encouragement of Lawing and the other members of ABC, one would not be surprised by the other four new members serving in a ministry soon. Through their involvement in small groups, discipling relationships are developed, and by their involvement in ministry, new members use their spiritual gifts and grow in faith. This fifth goal contains two essential parts of growing as a disciple and therefore is necessary for the assimilation of a new member. I am happy to report this goal was attained.

Summary of Project Goals

The five goals supporting the project's purpose of establishing a new member assimilation process at Airport Baptist Church of Greer, South Carolina, and their results have been overviewed. Each one directly contributes to the purpose of this project and are needed for the establishment of an assimilation process.

Strengths of the Project

The most gratifying attribute of this project is the long-term impact of writing and teaching the curriculum I entitled, "Following Christ with My Church." The curriculum contains a rich overview of doctrinal essentials necessary for believers to grow in Christ and to be assimilated as partners in the mission of the church. While the content was key, when combined with the written and oral presentation of the material, including the PowerPoint, it was instrumental in capturing and keeping the attention of

attendees. The curriculum was well received by both the leadership of ABC as well as the membership and guests who attended the training. Although the lack of post-class surveys returned failed to deliver a reliable conclusion as to the increase in knowledge of the class, or the lack thereof, the few that were returned revealed potential strengths as well as opportunities for future training. Even so, it is gratifying to know that the pastor chose the curriculum for ongoing new member training at ABC.

In addition to Lawing and several of his members complementing me on the material, the panel of experts included kind accolades with their critiques. Looking back, the amount of time and effort needed to produce the curriculum, as well as the accompanying leader's guide and PowerPoint, is minor compared to the reward. The critique of my curriculum from the panel of experts was of great help, and I am humbled to know their impression of it was so positive; several suggested it should be published.

Another benefit of this project was the time spent with Lawing and his people. There was mutual encouragement. I was privileged to have Lawing confide in me and to be able to offer advice and prayer for certain challenges he and ABC were facing. He personally and graciously expressed his appreciation of our time together and the benefits of my teaching. To this day, I maintain contact with Lawing to offer encouragement and pray for the matters he brings to my attention.

As a result of Lawing's enthusiastic support and the positive response to the classes and curriculum, ABC chose to include the requirement of completing the class before one may become a member in the bylaws of the church. Despite the project's deficiencies that will be described next, by God's grace, the assimilation process has been established at Airport Baptist Church.

Weaknesses of the Project

A project of this importance required individual goals that would contribute to the successful establishment of Airport Baptist Church's assimilation process. Having evaluated this project, I will note several areas I would approach differently given the

opportunity. Chronologically, the first deficiency I discovered in my attempt to complete this project was while working toward my second goal. I underestimated the amount of time and effort needed to write curriculum as well as prepare videos and a PowerPoint presentation for each session of the new members class. The curriculum was to provide the essential information and encouragement necessary to enable a prospective member to follow Christ as an active part of ABC. On the surface it seemed rather reasonable. I had led new member classes in various churches over the years and had personal notes, as well as a variety of resources at my disposal. Once I set hands to keyboard to create the curriculum, I began to realize I had almost bitten off more than I could chew. While I knew and had taught the essentials, I was now tasked with organizing these essentials in a manner that was not only doctrinally sound and flowed logically from session to session, but was also simple enough to capture the interest of a seeker and keep the interest of the experienced church member. While writing the final session of the curriculum, I remembered I would be handing it to a pastor for his use at his church. Therefore, I had to return to the start and go through each session adding the portions that would comprise a leader's guide to accompany the curriculum. The purpose of this work was more than worthy of every effort, but had I correctly understood the amount of time and effort required I would have begun sooner.

The next part of the project needing improvement was the process of finding effective ways to gather personal contact information from guests, from goal 1. I depended on the response of area pastors and the ability to test and use the best methods at ABC to conclude what method(s) would bear the most fruit of newcomers connecting with the church. When only 6 responded to my survey, I was left without answers as to what area pastors had learned about connecting with newcomers. Also related to this first goal was my presumption that the pastor would be open to trying new methods to connect with guests. Again, the fact that pastors may be wary of making a sudden change is something that, of all people, I should have considered. Every church is different, and the

pastor of ABC knew his people and the culture of their small church well enough to not waste time on new methods when he believed what he was doing was working.

The third weakness was with my planning and conducting of the new member course. This error ultimately proved the costliest. In my exuberance of having a church to conduct my project, I quickly agreed to keeping the sessions to one hour in length. Lawing asked me directly if I could lead the class in that amount of time and I optimistically answered, “Yes!” Once again, I see mistakes that could have been prevented had I only relied upon my experience. On the surface, it may appear the worst impact this error could have upon the class was continuing to meet another week or two. But in this case, Sunday school classes had already been scheduled to regather on the Sunday following the conclusion of the class. Therefore, on that Sunday, when I began to lead the added session, class attendance had dropped to approximately 10. It was at this point that I began to realize the degree of harm my miscalculation of time had caused. This blunder was costly in three ways.

First, the number of hours invested in creating the curriculum was almost immaterial if 75 percent of the class were not present to finish the final session. Second, every session was important, but the final session carried with it added importance. It was the conclusion and involved a final call to apply what had been learned. The closing session would be similar to the traditional invitation following an evangelistic service in that each person would be encouraged to respond to what God may have shown them and take whatever next step He would have them to take. This climactic ending was to seal the weeks in their memory so they would carry the importance of what had been taught with them as they followed Christ with their church family into the future. My failure to conclude the class on the date agreed upon resulted in a third loss; the project’s fourth goal. The fourth goal was to increase the knowledge of meaningful church membership among participants. My desire for members to know basic Christian doctrine was more than an academic aspiration. For church members, as well as newcomers, to leave the

class united around Christ, His Word, and His mission for them was both the pastor's and my hope. Even though the percentages reported earlier contained positive signs, with so few completing the post-class survey it would be impossible to accurately judge the increase in knowledge or lack thereof. All three of these losses are casualties of my zeal to complete my project on time.

Other weaknesses include my failure to take more time introducing the survey and putting the participants at ease. Some survey statements had no response and one reason for this could have been uncertainty and/or anxiety. Also, the survey's failure to include demographic questions such as age, sex, whether they were church members, and if members, how long had they been members, if they attended small groups or not, and if they were involved in ministry, prevented me from better understanding the results.

In summary, the deficiencies were underestimating the time required to write the material, my inability to learn how area pastors gather personal contact information from their guests due to my somewhat impersonal approach, attempting to squeeze the material into too short of a time frame, using a survey that could have been improved, unnecessarily producing videos, and failing to measure the results of the class due to underestimating the class length. Of these errors, my misjudgment of the time needed to lead the class is the most damaging deficiency. I hamstrung my own efforts to learn what, if any, improvement in the participants' knowledge there may have been as a consequence of teaching the curriculum. Overall, failing to adequately estimate the time needed to teach the material, in order to keep the sessions within the allotted time, resulted in the greatest deficiency and disappointment.

What I Would Do Differently

An after-action report is valuable for assessing and improving an event, but in my experience, few churches actually re-assess their ministries. As a result, little is learned, and the likelihood of improvement is small. Every church needs to establish an assimilation process, or a pathway to discipleship, so this project needs to be repeated.

Before leading another church through this process there are several things I would do differently.

Anticipate the Time Needed to Create Curriculum

Underestimating the amount of time needed to write the curriculum for the class was the first weakness listed above. If one were to attempt to create their own curriculum, I would advise at least one year be set aside for research and writing to produce a thorough, broad-based curriculum.

Increase Class Length

The next improvement I would make is to better estimate the length of each session and the duration of the class. Even now, as I begin refining the curriculum for publication, I must reevaluate the amount of time required for teaching with class interaction. There are several options, including expanding the six-week course to eight, and increasing the class time to 75 or 90 minutes. I have led similar courses on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday evenings, as well as Sunday mornings, and the classes have maintained good attendance. The class may also be taught on a weekend. Breaks must be factored into the schedule with the increased amount of the time for each session. Ideally, I would increase time for each session and/or include an additional session(s) so that the pace is unhurried, allowing time for discussion. Whatever schedule I would choose, the class must be led enthusiastically with consideration of the class's culture. While I have led classes of various lengths and schedules with good attendance, the willingness of participants to attend a class may easily be determined by the amount of time they are asked to commit. I may find it necessary to reorganize the curriculum into three or even four separate classes with two sessions a piece to reduce the time commitment of students. It may be easier for some to commit to completing the class if it is expanded to four successive levels with fewer sessions.

I do not believe remedying the situation should involve trimming the content of the class. I have repeatedly looked for ways to abbreviate it without hurting the depth of essential information needed by new church members if they are to fully assimilate and multiply. In addition to doing the obvious—extending the number of sessions and/or the length of the sessions—I have considered looking for information that could be moved to the appendix rather than removed from the material. Ultimately, my solution is to both lengthen the class sessions, include breaks, and when possible, refer participants to the appendix for further study.

Approach Pastors Personally

In hindsight, another area of the project I would do differently is how I would gather information from area pastors. As noted, only six pastors responded, and I feel confident that I could have had greater response had I approached this part of my research differently. I should have acknowledged what should have been obvious: pastors are some of the busiest people in a community. Everyone is susceptible to what I call “Inbox Overload,” especially pastors. I need not list the myriad of responsibilities, needs, and opportunities a pastor faces each day. Overlooking this fact resulted in very few completing the survey. I also should have remembered the importance of personal contacts when one is soliciting a response. Looking back, I should have taken time to make a brief phone call to each pastor to introduce myself and personally ask for their help. I could have then told those who agreed to look for an email. Furthermore, now I see that, after a reasonable amount of time, I should have made a personal call to pastors who had not responded. I have no doubt these efforts would have produced not only a greater response, but also an increase in the number of pastors I could call, “friend.”

Clarify Project Details with Pastor

I also came to realize that even if every pastor had responded to my survey, I would still not be able to try the various methods at ABC because Lawing preferred not

to subject his people to the experiment. As I made clear, I fully respect the pastor's decision and believe his personal method is likely more effective than others. Had I described the process in more detail when Lawing and I first began meeting, I may have been able to put him at ease with the idea of trying additional methods of connecting with newcomers.

Improve Survey

Additional changes I would make to the project may seem minor at first but could bring better results. The number of post-class surveys returned was small, in large part because of my underestimating the time needed to teach the material. However, even with the small number of surveys returned there could have been improvement. This came to my attention when I saw that some participants had not responded to all of the survey statements. I now believe that had I put the group at ease and offered some reminders, I may have prevented some surveys from being returned incomplete. When the surveys are distributed to attendees, I should stress several things to help put respondents at ease. First, I should bring to their attention that there are no wrong answers. Fear of making a "mistake" could cause some to simply skip a survey statement of which they are unsure. Another approach to prevent the survey from intimidating is to tell the class that their first response is normally the best. Furthermore, by reminding them that their responses are confidential, and the results will help them personally could relieve any stress they may have. Finally, through my tone of voice and body language I could convey a lightheartedness to help them relax and not fear the results.

Another easy change I would make that could substantially impact the usefulness of the survey is regarding the survey instrument itself. I should have included a few questions to help me categorize respondents. For example, knowing if someone was a member and if so, how long they had been a member, could have shed light on some responses. Another consideration is the possibility of including statements that might reveal whether a respondent applies their knowledge. One example of this could be asking how often a person attends church. If they had indicated a strong belief in the gathering

of God's people for worship, but later indicated they rarely attended, I might have known how to better interpret answers. Any efforts to gain personal information in this direction must be done thoughtfully and in consultation with others as to not cause harm.

Additional Modifications

Other modifications to the survey include adding "Sunday school" when referring to small groups. As mentioned, some may not view Sunday school and small groups as the same. Additionally, I wrote some statements in such a way as to virtually reveal the preferred answer. In the future I should consider if the way I phrase statements unduly influences participants.

Another modification I would make if repeating this project involves the way I phrased goal 5. The goal was stated to have 80 percent of those completing the new member class joining a small group and 75 percent of those completing it and becoming church members, to begin participating in a ministry at ABC. In hindsight, I should have clarified to clearly indicate I was referring to non-members completing the new member course. At first glance, knowing it is a new member course would lead most to believe only prospective members would be attending, but in this instance, Lawing asked all members to attend in order to build unity. Therefore, the original goal statement did not intend to mean 80 percent of everyone who completed the new member course at ABC, but 80 percent of the newcomers who completed the course.

Freddy Cardoza, one of the experts who evaluated the curriculum I had written, brought another matter to my attention. I mistakenly provided the same rubric for experts to use when evaluating each of the six sessions. Upon closer inspection, I realized some of the rubric statements did not apply beyond the first session.

A final modification I would make to this project is to eliminate plans to produce a video for each session. My intention was to have videos available to those who were unable to attend a session. There were no requests for the video, and I found producing

them was not only time-consuming but unnecessary. In lieu of preparing a video for each session, I should have simply videoed each class.

Potentially Helpful Research

Future research that may prove helpful in improving assimilation could include research to discover the effect of relationships between new members and current church members over time. A rubric could be established using various indicators of spiritual growth to suggest how well a member was assimilated and growing as a disciple. These results could be compared with the strength of their relationships with fellow members before attending and at increments. I would expect those new members who had good relationships with church members before becoming members and those who developed meaningful relationships within the church to be more likely to stay connected to the church. The findings of this research not only affirmed the importance of relationships within the church body, but very well may underscore the importance of connecting with the unchurched if they are to be reached with the gospel.

Theological Reflections

At the beginning of biblical revelation, chronologically, from the life of Job and his family, or historically, from the book of Genesis and the creation of man, God has designed community to be an integral part of humanity. From the vantage point of the Trinity, God created man and later declared, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18 ESV). The knowledge that the Creator desires a relationship with His creation should dumbfound the most erudite scholar as well as anyone who attempts to comprehend the vast difference between God—the Holy Other, and man, the unholy rebel. Yet God’s love for the prodigal, the outsider, and even those who would attempt to persecute Him sets the standard for His followers (Acts 9:4). Second only to a wholehearted love for Him, God expects His people to love those near them (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18; Mark 12:33). This love sets His people apart (John 13:35). The great love of

God in Christ compels believers as “those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the One Who died for them and was raised” (2 Cor 5:14-15 HCSB). Had the Lord Jesus never given His followers the explicit command to make disciples, the fact His followers are led to love others because they love Him would be enough to pull any surrendered believer toward seeking to be a peacemaker between God and man (Matt 28:18-20; Matt 5:9; Jas 3:18).

The fruit of God’s great love for man is seen in this mortal life as unbelievers repent and begin a relationship with Him and fellow believers in their local church. The Spirit of God works through the Word of God and the people to bring forth a “harvest of righteousness” (Jas 3:17). The love of God makes true community possible. Believers who are in awe of God and His love will seek not only to begin witnessing relationships with outsiders so they also may have a relationship with Christ, but will graciously include them in their community of Christ-followers as well. If these new believers are surrendered to Christ and surrounded by a caring family of God, then they will continue to learn how to express their love for God and others as it has been demonstrated to them. Believers being integrated into a community of Christ-followers who will love them and be committed to their spiritual growth is necessary to make disciples. This process is called assimilation and is central to God’s plan to restore fallen man’s relationship with Him. Through this project, my understanding of how God’s love for mankind is expressed through His people and the importance of building intentional relationships for the purpose of multiplying disciples into future generations has been strengthened. I am especially encouraged by the examples of God reaching through His people to those who were considered outsiders. I have a greater desire to continue reaching outside my comfort zone to show the love of Christ to others as well as leading fellow believers to do the same.

Personal Reflections

In my nearly forty years of ministry in local churches across the southeastern United States, I have seen first-hand how churches experience inner conflict that not only

divides the fellowship and dilutes the message of the church, but also causes severe damage to the church's ability to fulfill its mission. Anyone who has had a front row seat to a schism in the fellowship and has been wounded by "friendly fire" could bear witness to the pain and confusion spawned by strife. I am convinced that proper assimilation of new members into a church as a part of developing disciples could prevent many controversies within churches from beginning and certainly limit their damage should controversy arise. It is better to prevent conflict before it arises than try to manage it once it does.

Unwittingly, many churches have found themselves in storms of their own making. Insofar as they have for years tacitly endorsed the bad behavior of some believers, promoted members beyond their spiritual maturity, and tolerated those who "sow discord among the brothers," they are reaping what they have sown (Prov 6:19; Gal 6:7; Hos 8:7). On the other hand, churches that understand assimilation as a part of discipleship, as I have attempted to describe in this project, not only prevent much of the discord in the church, but also protect unity and increase their effectiveness as well. Pastors and members often must decide whether they want a happy crowd or a healthy church.⁸ Establishing an assimilation process that includes an excellent new member class is likely to be much easier in a new work. Nevertheless, Lawing has proven that even a traditional church with older members can press "reset" and renew their commitment to Christ while also laying a strong foundation for a healthy future through the establishment of an assimilation process based on a biblically sound and practical new member class. Personally, I have seen the value of this project for not only assimilation, but also revitalization. I have also discovered a love for writing and a desire to improve and publish materials to build up the church.

⁸ For an example of a pastor faced with either disrupting the unity of church or sacrificing his integrity, see Richard Exley, "Confronting the Fear of Controversy," in *Dangers, Toils & Snares: Resisting the Hidden Temptations of Ministry*, by Richard Exley, Mark Galli, and John Ortberg (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1994), 66-67.

Conclusion

This project sought to accomplish something of lasting and immeasurable value even deeper than the stated goal of establishing an assimilation process at Airport Baptist Church. Rather than a man-made program to merely increase numbers, I intended this project to be a practical expression of the Lord's command to make disciples (Matt 28:18-20). Although the task of making disciples begins with God's sovereign work of grace in salvation and is instantaneous, it also includes an indeterminable time of teaching so that the new disciple becomes a disciple-maker. Working with Lawing and establishing a new member assimilation process at Airport Baptist Church leaves me with the hope that the members of ABC will reach out and connect with others, nurture them to faith in Christ, and teach them to follow Christ with His church.

APPENDIX 1

ABC CHURCH MEMBERSHIP CHART

Table A1 reflects the church membership of Airport Baptist Church organized by age and sex.

Table A1. Airport Baptist Church membership chart

Airport Baptist Church Membership			
AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
5-17	5	3	8
18-24	2	1	3
25-34	2	3	5
35-54	9	15	24
55-64	9	10	19
65-74	9	12	21
75-84	9	10	19
85+	5	17	22
TOTALS	50	71	121

APPENDIX 2

SURVEY OF AREA PASTORS

Connecting with Newcomers Survey

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN OUR SURVEY. WE HOPE TO LEARN HOW TO BEST CONNECT WITH NEWCOMERS SO THEY CONTINUE TO ATTEND OUR CHURCHES AND CHOOSE TO FOLLOW CHRIST.

PLEASE FILL OUT THIS QUICK SURVEY AND LET US KNOW YOUR THOUGHTS.

- **Valid email address**
- **Your name and position**
- **Your church**
- **What methods have you used to collect guest or visitor information from newcomers?**
 - Asking newcomers to complete and return a guest card during the offering*
 - Asking newcomers to complete a card and return it during the offering at the close of the service*
 - Asking newcomers to complete a card and return it for a gift after the service*
 - Asking newcomers to come by a particular location after the service to meet the pastor and/or staff and return card*
 - Asking newcomers to text a key word to a number so they receive a link to register online*
 - Asking newcomers to "check-in" on Facebook*
 - Asking everyone to complete a card and return it so guests see others and do the same*
 - Using a registry for each pew that is passed and everyone registers*
 - Personally meeting newcomers through casual conversation ask if they would like to know more about the ministry and if so, asking for their contact information*
 - Personally meeting newcomers and only asking for information when they have attended several times and a relationship has been built*
 - Other*

- **What method(s) are you currently using?**
- **How effective is your current method of connecting with newcomers?**

Please rate 1 – 5

1 - Not very effective (we rarely receive contact information from our newcomers)

5 - Very effective (we gather contact information from almost every newcomer)

- **Would you like to know the results of this survey?**
- **Comments**
- **Thank you for participating in this study! How may I pray for you?**

APPENDIX 3

EMAIL TO AREA PASTORS

I hope you and yours, as well as the folks at [church name], are well. I need your help with a brief survey. I'm reaching out to fellow pastors and church leaders to ask a few questions about connecting with newcomers for part of my doctoral project.

In addition to leading Life Worth Living, I am a doctoral student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary studying church revitalization.

Part of the research for my doctoral project is discovering what methods area churches find effective when connecting with newcomers. I would love to hear how you connect with those God sends to your church!

Would you help me and answer a few questions about connecting with newcomers?

You know how important connecting with people is. Many things have changed over the years, but God's call for His people to make disciples is not one of them. For nearly 40 years I have been trying to connect with people so I can tell them about Jesus. What a ride!

After prayer, the first step we can take towards making a disciple is connecting. Following Christ's example, our disciple-making starts with a relationship.

We pray, study, plan, prepare, work to build relationships and encourage people to visit our churches and come to Christ. When guests (or "visitors") do attend we want to do our best to connect with them. I've tried every way imaginable to connect so we can begin a relationship with our guests. I've led large and small churches in cities, suburbs, and in the country. What works in one place may not work in another. What worked at one time may not work now.

What works for you?

How do you and your church best connect with newcomers?

I have a very brief survey [here](#). Just click the link and a new window will open to it. It will only take two to five minutes!

When the results are in, I'll put it all together and send it to you so you can see what is working for other churches in our Three River Baptist Association. I'm always learning from others. Maybe God will show us a different approach that helps us connect with more newcomers who will come to Christ.

I appreciate your help with this. I know very well the joys and challenges of leading a church. I would be overjoyed if this helps even one of the churches in our association!

Click here: [Connecting with Newcomers Survey](#)

I'm praying for God to prepare you for tomorrow and be glorified through you!

Thanks so much! Because of "Calvary's Love," I am

Your partner in the gospel,

--Mark Bordeaux

APPENDIX 4

SUMMARY OF AREA PASTORS' RESPONSES

METHODS UTILIZED

- 83% - Asking newcomers to complete and return a guest card during the offering*
- 83% - Asking newcomers to complete a card and return it during the offering at the close of the service*
- 17% - Asking newcomers to complete a card and return it for a gift after the service*
- 17% - Asking newcomers to come by a particular location after the service to meet the pastor and/or staff and return card*
- 17% - Asking newcomers to text a key word to a number so they receive a link to register online*
- 0% - Asking newcomers to "check-in" on Facebook*
- 17% - Asking everyone to complete a card and return it so guests see others and do the same*
- 0% - Using a registry for each pew that is passed and everyone registers*
- 50% - Personally meeting newcomers through casual conversation ask if they would like to know more about the ministry and if so, asking for their contact information*
- 67% - Personally meeting newcomers and only asking for information when they have attended several times and a relationship has been built*
- 0% - Other*

METHODS CURRENTLY IN USE BY RESPONDING PASTORS

- "All of the above"
- "text a key word and personal interaction"
- "I like to meet them personally and contact via phone call, text, or email the following week"
- "Because of COVID, we're asking guests to meet a pastor at the back."
- "Due to COVID, we are currently only using an online form (with very little success)"
- "Due to COVID, we are currently only using an online form (with very little success). Pre-COVID, we are using the two that were checked above."

EFFECTIVENESS

- 67% Ineffective or effective
- 17% Somewhat effective
- 17% Somewhat ineffective

APPENDIX 5

SAMPLE SESSION OF NEW MEMBER CLASS CURRICULUM

This is a sample of the new member class curriculum. The curriculum is titled, “Following Christ with My Church Family,” and is divided into two sections, “Discovering Discipleship” and “Developing Disciples.” The sample included in this appendix is from part 2, session 4, “God’s People with Purpose.”

The titles of the sessions are as follows:

Session 1: “God’s Purpose for Your Life”

Session 2: “God’s Purpose Through Your Life”

Session 3: “God’s Precepts for Your Life”

Session 4: “God’s People with Purpose”

Session 5: “God’s People in Action

Session 6:” God’s People United

These sessions are followed by:

“What is Your Next Step?”

“Finding Your Place at Airport Baptist Church”

“Conclusion”

“Appendix”

“Resources”

“What Others are Saying”

FOLLOWING CHRIST WITH MY CHURCH
PART TWO: DEVELOPING DISCIPLES
SESSION FOUR: GOD’S PEOPLE WITH PURPOSE

WE’RE IN THIS TOGETHER!

Following Christ with My Church is the title of this study because Christ intends for us to follow Him with a local assembly of believers. Each believer has the joy of a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus and has been gifted and called to varying personal responsibilities. It is equally true each believer should come together to bring Him glory and build up one another.

Church attendance is important, but by itself it does not fully describe the way God’s people, His Body, should connect and interact. It is not enough to sit with others as spectators on Sundays. Many have forsaken the fellowship and left their churches to die, while others have continued to attend with the self-righteous attitude “God, I thank You I’m not like other men” (Lk. 18:11). Neither are pleasing to God and neither results in others choosing to worship Christ.

Some will object to any emphasis on corporate worship with the tired phrase, “I don’t have to go to church to be a Christian!” I am reminded of something my pastor, Adrian Rogers, said many years ago in response to this. He said something to the effect of, “*That’s true, but that is only part of the truth and when someone makes part of the truth, the whole truth, then that part becomes a lie.*”¹

A common pitfall of church membership is believing the purpose of the church is to serve members in much the same way a club membership entitles its members to certain services. While it is true God’s people are to love and serve others, bear one another’s burdens, and to build up the Body of Christ, the focus of Christ followers should no more be on themselves than our Lord’s focus was on Himself, but rather the Father (Jn. 5:30; Phil. 2:3-8; Mt. 20:28).

Far too often, trivial matters offend church members. Oh, they are not trivial to them but in the light of Scripture, they are petty. Churches divide over personal preferences far and away more times than for significant doctrinal differences! When we, His followers, come to believe it is all about us, we dishonor the Head of the Church.

¹ Adrian Rogers, sermon delivered at Bellevue Baptist Church, Cordova, TN, as overheard by author.

You will find Session Four presents the biblical description of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ-followers should not forsake biblical fellowship, but neither should we think of church attendance, worship, study, and service as legalistic duties. A vibrant, unified body of believers who are passionate about worshipping the Lord and loving their neighbors is the evidence the world needs to see if they are to believe and follow Christ.

The Meaning of the Church

What does the word “church” really mean?

Q: What comes to mind when you hear the word, “church”?

Common uses of “church”

- **The “church house,” the “place of meeting”**
- **A particular DENOMINATION**
- **An organization of believers related to a country**
- **A local organization of believers**
- **The UNIVERSAL body of believers**

THE SOURCE FOR THE WORD “CHURCH” – (GK.) ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ²

- **εκ - out of**
- **καλεω - to call**

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

The Scripture’s use of the word “church”

All

- **Matthew 16:18** And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.
- **Ephesians 1:22-23a** And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body
- **Ephesians 5:23** For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

² Words printed in Greek or Hebrew are for the leader or student who wishes to do further personal study.

Local _____ of Believers

- **Matthew 18:17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.
- **1 Corinthians 1:2** To the church of God in Corinth...
- **Romans 16:23** Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.

The _____ of the Church

Who does the Bible say is the Owner of the Church?

- **Matthew 16:18** ...I will build my church...
- **Romans 16:16b** ...All the churches of Christ send greetings
- **Ephesians 5:23b** ...Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.
- **The Church is pictured as Christ's bride** (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25; Rev. 21:2, 9)
- **"Body of Christ"** (Eph. 4:15f; 1Cor. 12:12, 27)
- **"God's Elect"** (Ro. 8:33; Col. 3:12)
- **"People of God"** (1Pt. 2:10)
- **"Household" or "Family of God"** (Eph. 2:19; 3:15; 4:6)
- **"Planting of God"** (1Cor. 3:9)
- **"Temple of God"** (Eph. 2:21f; 1Pt. 2:5)
- **Acts 20:28b** ...The church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

THE _____ of the Church

- **The Birth of the Church – PENTECOST (Acts 2:1-4; 36-47)**

For we were all baptized by one Spirit



1 Corinthians 12:13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

The _____ of the Church

Belonging to the Local Church

“A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel...”³

We're Better Together!

A. We become part of His church by SALVATION

- **Acts 2:47** Praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

B. We proclaim we are His followers by public _PROFESSION_ of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ

- **Matthew 10:32-33** Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.
- **Romans 10:11** (KJV) For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

C. We identify with Christ by our BAPTISM as a symbol of salvation

- **Acts 8:12** But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.
- **Acts 2:41** Those who accepted his message were baptized.

D. We follow Christ with OTHER members of the local church

- **Hebrews 10:25** Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
- **Matthew 18:20** For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

*Transition/humor:

³ *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/> accessed September 2, 2020.

How to stay safe in the world today:

1. *Avoid riding in automobiles because they are responsible for 20 percent of all fatal accidents.*
2. *Do not stay home because 17 percent of all accidents occur in the home.*
3. *Avoid walking on streets or sidewalks because 14 percent of all accidents occur to pedestrians.*
4. *Avoid traveling by air, rail, or water because 16 percent of all accidents involve these forms of transportation.*
5. *Of the remaining 33 percent, 32 percent of all deaths occur in hospitals. Above all else, avoid hospitals*

You will be pleased to learn that only .001 percent of all deaths occur in worship services in church, and these are usually related to previous physical disorders. Therefore, logic tells us that the safest place for you to be at any given point in time is at church! Bible study is safe, too. The percentage of deaths during Bible study is even less.

For safety sake, attend church and read your Bible...it could save your life.⁴

“Many of us church members have lost the biblical understanding of what it means to be part of the Body of Christ.”⁵

⁴ Mark Moring, “Elorne, Illinois,” Illustration submission to preachingtoday.com, a service of Christianity Today, accessed by subscription, June 12, 2001.

⁵ Thom S. Rainer, *I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude That Makes the Difference* (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 5, Kindle.

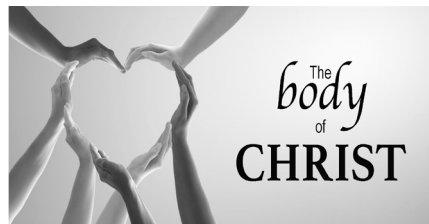
The _____ of the Church

More than an organization – it is an ORGANISM!

1. The LIFE of the Church

A. The Church is the BODY of Christ

- **1 Corinthians 12:27** Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
- **Romans 12:5** so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.



B. CHRIST is the Head of the Body

- **Ephesians 4:15** speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.
- **Ephesians 5:23** Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.

C. The Church Lives Because CHRIST Lives

- **1 Corinthians 15:22** For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive
- **Acts 17:28** For in him we live, and move, and have our being
- **Romans 8:1** Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus
- **Ephesians 2:1** As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins
- **Colossians 2:13** When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins

D. Christ Lives through the Church by His HOLY SPIRIT

• The POWER of Pentecost – The Person of God the Holy Spirit

- **Acts 1:8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
- **Romans 8:9** You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.
- **1 John 3:24** Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

- **1 Corinthians 3:16** Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?
- **Philippians 2:13** it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

E. Christ is known by the LOVE of the Church

- **John 13:34-35** "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
- **John 15:12** My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.
- **1 Thessalonians 4:9** Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.
- **1 Peter 1:22** Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.
- **1 John 3:11** This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.
- **1 John 4:7-11** Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He
- **Ephesians 4:15-16** Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The _____ of the Church

And He [Jesus] is the Head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. (Colossians 1:18)



The Description of Leaders

1 Peter 5:1-2 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve.

1. The MATURITY of the Elder

(Gk.) πρεσβύτερος⁶ – Acts 11:30 is the first use of the term for Christian preachers⁷ And in Acts 20:17 he uses this term for the leaders of the Ephesian church. This word is used to denote age, rank or responsibility. The elder is mature in spiritual experience and understanding.

2. The Care of the SHEPHERD (Pastor)

Ephesians 4:11-13 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

(Gk.) ποιμήν – “Shepherd” Used metaphorically as “a shepherd of the people,” “a pastor”⁸ “This word ποιμήν [*poimēn*] is from a root meaning to protect. Jesus said the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11) and called himself the Good Shepherd. In Heb. 13:20 Christ is the Great Shepherd (cf. 1 Pet 2:25).⁹

In John 21:15-18 the Lord Jesus instructs Peter to “tend” and “feed” His sheep. “The lesson to be learnt, as Trench points out, is that, in the spiritual care of God’s children, the feeding of the flock from the Word of God is the constant and regular necessity; it is to have the foremost place. The tending (which includes this) consists of other acts, of discipline, authority, restoration, material assistance of individuals, but they are incidental in comparison with the feeding.”¹⁰

3. The _____ of an Overseer

(Gk.) επίσκοπος – “an overseer...a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian or superintendent . . . the superintendent, elder, or overseer of a Christian church.”¹¹ “A man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by

⁶ Words printed in Greek or Hebrew are provided for the leader or students who wish to do further personal study.

⁷ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2000).

⁸ Robert Scott, Henry Drisler. *A Greek-English Lexicon* (UK: Harper and brothers, 1897) 1237, accessed September 10, 2020, https://www.google.com/books/edition/_/-e04AQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

⁹ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Baker, 1931), 537.

¹⁰ W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, VA: MacDonald), 1989, 428.

¹¹ James Strong, *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon* (Woodside Bible Fellowship,

others are done rightly...guardian of souls, one who watches over their welfare.”¹²

1 Peter 2:25 (Speaking of Christ as Pastor and Overseer) For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

The Qualifications of Leaders –

The Pastor (See: Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:2-7)

Basic Qualifications

- **Above REPROACH**
- **A “one-_____ man”**
- **Manages household well**
- **Hospitable**
- **Loves the good**
- **Sensible**
- **Prudent**
- **Self-controlled (disciplined)**
- **Just**
- **Devout**
- **Trustworthy messenger (“holds fast the word”)**
- **Gentleness**
- **Able to teach**
- **Temperate (what may be permissible may not be sensible)**

Basic Disqualifications

- **Not self-willed (overbearing)**
- **Not quick-tempered**
- **Not addicted to wine**
- **Not violent**
- **Not covetous**
- **Not a new CONVERT**
- **Not resentful**
- **Not contentious**

The Duties of the Leaders – Pastor

_____ the word (Acts 6:4; 1 Tim. 4:13; Ro. 10:8-17; 1 Cor. 1:21)

2 Timothy 4:1-5 In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give

1995), Logos Bible Software.

¹² Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 243.

you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Make _____

Matthew 28:18-20 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

2 Timothy 2:2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

_____ the saints in the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12)

As the pastor equips fellow Christ-followers to focus on Christ and His purpose and priorities for the church, they do the work of the ministry and also equip others!¹³

_____ the work of the church (1Pet. 5:2a)

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

*Encourage your pastor!*¹⁴

The best way to encourage your pastor is to faithfully follow Christ!

Q: How was Paul encouraged by those he led?

Some examples: 1 Cor. 1:11; 2 Cor. 3:2-3, 7:9-13; Phil. 1:1-9, 2:1-5, 4:1

FORBES MAGAZINE’S “9 TOUGHEST LEADERSHIP ROLES”¹⁵ –

Pastor Ranks #5!

Pros: You’re seen as a man or woman of God, and what you say gets taken seriously, at least momentarily.



¹³ See “Simple Church” at the close of this session for more information on the purpose and priorities of the church.

¹⁴ Statistics on pastoral stress, burnout, and suicide are alarming.

¹⁵ Rob Asghar, “Ranking the 9 Toughest Leadership Roles,” *Forbes*, February 25, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robasghar/2014/02/25/ranking-the-9-toughest>

Cons: “Being a pastor is like death by a thousand paper cuts,” says Rev. Dr. Ken Fong, senior pastor at Evergreen Baptist Church in Rosemead, California and a program director at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena.

“You’re scrutinized and criticized from top to bottom, stem to stern. You work for an invisible, perfect Boss, and you’re supposed to lead a ragtag gaggle of volunteers towards God’s coming future. It’s like herding cats, but harder.”

Adds Rob Jackson, interim pastor at Hilliard Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio:

“I’ve managed people in a traditional office and also in a church—and one of the major differences between is most of the workers in a church are volunteers who will not do something just because it’s their job. Managers of volunteers must always lead by demonstrating a vision for our mission and how their work fits into it

The Qualifications of Leaders – The Deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13)

Elders who lead and deacons who serve perform different functions, but the spiritual qualifications required for both are essentially identical. There is no drop-off in spiritual quality or maturity from overseers to deacons. The only difference is that overseers are “able to teach” (3:2).¹⁶

The Deacons of the Church

Leading Servants of the Church and The Pastor’s Partners in Ministry

Acts 6:1-7 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

[leadership-roles/#41b449d24e2b](#).

¹⁶ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *1 Timothy*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 124.

They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Meaning of “deacon” (Gk.) - διακονος¹⁷

“One who executes the commands of another, esp. of a master, a servant, attendant, minister 1a) the servant of a king 1b) a deacon, one who, by virtue of the office assigned to him by the church, cares for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use 1c) a waiter, one who serves food and drink.”¹⁸

Both pastors and deacons are to serve as examples to the church. In some churches, deacons have essentially the role of elders, but the ministry of a deacon is not one of authority. Pastors are not to be dictators but should value the wisdom of those in his church.

As noted earlier, pastors, elders, and overseers are different descriptions of the same office. These men have been set apart by God to serve the Body of Christ by leading. Leadership is influence. Deacons serve and support the leadership of their pastor(s) unless there is a biblical reason to do otherwise.

Church Leadership – A Biblical Organization Chart



“The Greatest among you will be your servant” (Mt. 23:11)

“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph.5:21)

“Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him Who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

¹⁷ Words printed in Greek or Hebrew are provided for the leader or student who wishes to do further personal study.

¹⁸ James Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* (Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995), Logos Bible Software.

Meet the Pastor and staff of Airport Baptist Church



Mark Lawing and Crystal



Frank Harvell,
Minister of
Music

Meet the Church Council and Deacons of Airport Baptist Church:

-
-
-
-
-

SIMPLE CHURCH

We must be careful not to be overwhelmed by the many descriptions and duties of the Church. By our Lord's teaching and example, we know following Christ together is not "rocket science"! Sometimes, organizations tend to become more complex over time and lose their effectiveness as a result. This is also true with churches. Let's remember our Lord showed us following Him is simple!

Think about it...

Q: We have learned wonderful things about the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, but do we know our purpose?

Some answer that question by listing activities or ministries the church should be practicing. For example, ministering to the poor, encouraging one another, teaching the Bible, prayer, evangelism, fellowship, etc.

Would it not be wiser to place all of these ministries as expressions of the purpose of the Church? When we simplify the purpose of the church and begin with the top priorities Christ gave the church, every other Scripture-based ministry the Spirit of God leads us to pursue will (super)naturally result.

THE SIMPLE PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES OF THE CHURCH

The Simple Purpose of the Church – Glorify God

The transcendent, sublime, consummate focus of God's people is God, Himself.

*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that **in everything he might have the supremacy** (Col. 1:18; emphasis mine).*

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

The Simple Priorities of the Church – How do we best glorify God?
Insofar as we obey our Lord's Great Commands and Great Commission, we bring glory to the One True God!

Q: What did the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, say were the most important commands?

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" 29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.'³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'³¹ The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mk. 12:28-31).

Q: What commission did Christ give His followers that must be obeyed if we are to fulfill these two commands?

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt. 28:18-20).

Q: How is the "Family of God" similar to a family? (Mt. 6:9; Eph. 3:14-15; 1 Pt. 4:17)

Q: How is the "Body of Christ" similar to the human body? (Ro. 7:4; 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12)

Q: In what ways are believers equal yet have different gifts and responsibilities?

Q: How would you know if a church:

- Does not have the right priorities?
- Has turned inward instead of outward?

Q: What happens when a local church does these things?

A healthy, maturing, and multiplying church is the result of submitting to God's Spirit and having the right purpose and priorities!

APPENDIX 6
CURRICULUM EVALUATION RUBRIC

New Member Class Curriculum Evaluation Tool					
Part One Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The lesson is clearly helpful for introducing God's purpose in salvation.					
The material is faithful to the Bible's teaching on spiritual salvation.					
The material is theologically sound.					
The thesis of the lesson is clearly stated.					
The points of the lesson clearly support the thesis.					
The lesson contains points of practical application.					
The lesson is sufficiently thorough in its coverage of the material.					
Overall, the lesson is clearly presented.					

APPENDIX 7

NEW MEMBER CLASS PRE- AND-POST SURVEY

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the current understanding and practices of those desiring membership in Airport Baptist Church. This research is being conducted by Mark Bordeaux for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project. In this research, you will answer questions before the project and you will answer the same questions at the conclusion of the project. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

Thank you for your desire to discover God’s best for your life and His work at Airport as well as how you may best join God and impact our world! This survey will help us to tailor our new member class to give you the best experience possible.

Please use the following scale to indicate whether you “Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Disagree Somewhat, Agree Somewhat, Agree, or Strongly Agree” with the statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Strongly Agree			
	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA			
1. I have made a life-changing commitment to receive Christ as my Savior and follow Him.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
2. I am committed to seeking God daily through Scripture reading and prayer.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
3. All Christ-followers are to bring Him glory by helping others to follow Him.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
4. It is important for Christ-followers to faithfully attend and support a local church.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
5. The Bible is God’s Word and is true, trustworthy, reliable, accurate, and powerful.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
6. Baptism is necessary for sins to be washed away.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
7. I believe God Christ wants His followers today to grow like His first followers by gathering regularly in small groups for study, prayer, and encouragement.				SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

8. There is no other way to have a relationship with God and enter Heaven when we die than through Jesus.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
9. I have committed to practice what the Bible teaches believers about returning to God a minimum 10% of their gross income through their local church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
10. There are many religions, but they all lead to the same God.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
11. The pastor is the shepherd-leader of the local church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
12. Deacons are the ruling board of the local church.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
13. Spiritual gifts are only to be used to build up others.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
14. I know what my spiritual gifts are.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
15. If someone offends me I should tell others and ask them to pray for them.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
16. I know what the Southern Baptist Convention is and why Airport Baptist Church is a supporting member.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
17. I understand what the Cooperative Program is and why it is important.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
18. The purpose of our worship services is to help everyone feel good.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
19. The mission and purpose of the church is to fulfill the Lord's Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
20. Once a person is saved they could turn away from Jesus and lose their salvation.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
21. The maturity of a Christian may be determined by how long they have been a Christian.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
22. People who speak in "tongues" in the Bible are speaking languages of others that they have not learned.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
23. Speaking in "tongues" is a sign of being saved.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
24. An indication of spiritual growth is one's focus on God and desire to help others to follow Christ.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
25. Worship that pleases God is based upon the Bible and focuses on glorifying Christ.	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA

APPENDIX 8

COMMITMENT FORM

Airport Baptist Church

Loving God—Growing Together—Serving Others

A Commitment to Discipleship

Is a commitment to Christ, His Church, and His Mission

The Christian life is the life of Christ living through His followers

As disciple of Christ is a learner/follower of Christ

A local church is a community of Christ-followers

Christ's mission for His Church is to make disciples

A Commitment to Following Christ

Yes! With God's help, I want to be a follower/learner of Christ

who joins other followers on mission for Christ

to make disciples of future generations.

Please save a place for me at Airport Baptist Church's Inaugural New Member Training!



Signature _____

APPENDIX 9

PROMOTIONAL PIECE



Airport Baptist Church
Loving God--Growing Together--Serving Others

FOLLOWING CHRIST WITH MY CHURCH (Dates, times, location)

Is there more?

- ***Did Jesus die for us only so we could go to heaven?***
- ***Did Jesus found His church just so we could meet together?***
- ***Did Jesus give us gifts to be spectators?***

Yes! There is SO MUCH MORE!

Find God's purpose for your life and for Airport Baptist Church!

- ***Get to know your pastor!***
- ***Discover what we believe and why we believe it!***
- ***Know what we do and why we do it!***

What others are saying: [Customize with recent quotes from classes at ABC]

- ***"I enjoyed getting to know Mark better and learning more about the beliefs of ABC. I was surprised to learn only 15% of Millennials are believers."***
- ***"I loved it! It was a good start to knowing Christ!"***
- ***"I liked meeting the people who attended as well as getting to know more about our pastor."***
- ***"I learned a lot that surprised me. It was very informative and interesting, as well."***
- ***"The workshop reinforced that I need to have a closer relationship with Christ. I need to walk the walk and talk the talk more."***
- ***"I would recommend the workshop to newcomers. The 6 hours we spent at the workshop answered some questions for me."***
- ***"I thank you so much for how you just opened your arms and welcomed my family and me to the church."***

Register by (date)

Ways to Register: Online: (web address) by calling church office (number), or by using sign-up sheet in foyer

For more information

Email: pastor'semail@churchwebsite Office phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX

APPENDIX 10

EMAIL INVITATION TO NEW MEMBER CLASS

Dear _____,

I want to invite you to join us in ***Following Christ With My Church!***

Following Christ With My Church is for anyone who wants to know the basics of following Christ at Airport Baptist Church. This includes our new friends who are considering becoming Airport Partners (members), as well as members who want a great refresher.

Following Christ With My Church is divided into our ***Discovering Discipleship*** and our ***Developing Disciples***. The ***Discovering Discipleship*** provides an overview of what we believe and why we believe it. It explains Airport's basic beliefs along with our mission and purpose.

Developing Disciples naturally follows our ***Discovering Discipleship*** and overviews what we do and why we do it. Here we talk about how to put into practice what we believe. I provide an introduction and overview to our ministry. Here we see ways to plug in and use our spiritual gifts.

At the conclusion of ***Following Christ With My Church***, attendees have an opportunity to discover spiritual gifts, find a small group, a place to serve, and partner with us by becoming an Airport member. ***Following Christ With My Church*** lays a foundation ensuring everyone God calls to Airport has the foundation for a life of ministry.

You will enjoy our time together. We laugh and learn. You'll come away knowing things that many long-time church members don't know! Best of all (for me), I get to spend quality time with you and a few other friends.

While I never ask any questions or put any pressure on those attending, you are free to ask me any question about anything! So, you'll come away not only knowing God's work at Airport, but you'll know your pastor better as well. After the final session, we have a church-wide fellowship celebrating our new partners.

I am grateful God sent you to Airport and I know He expects me to "prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:12). ***Following Christ With My Church*** is designed to do just that.

To sign up for our next ***Following Christ With My Church*** or to get more information, call Pastor Mark at XXX-XXX-XXXX or email malawing@gmail.com.

Bro. Mark Lowing

APPENDIX 11

POST-CLASS FOLLOW UP EMAIL

Dear _____,

Thank you for your participation in *Following Christ With My Church*. Your willingness to attend and invest your time shows how serious you take following Christ and serving Him through your church.

Thank you for the comments and recommendations you shared on your evaluations. I am thankful for all the positive feedback and good suggestions. I hope to improve our content, format, and delivery each time.

Your [small group leader/Sunday School teacher] will be contacting you this week.

_____ will also be contacting you about serving.

Prayer and Scripture... I have some suggestions...

Look to see where God is working and be willing to step out in faith to join Him in His work. As you love Him you will love others. Be ready to serve, encourage, and be a friend.

God will give you opportunities to share with others what He has done for you.

I am praying for you and I look forward to seeing you Sunday!

[signed] Bro. Mark Lawing

P.S. Who are you inviting to join you Sunday? Let me know and I'll pray for them with you!

APPENDIX 12

PRE AND POST CLASS SURVEY RESULTS

Table A2 contains participant's pre- and post-survey responses to survey statements. Pre- and post-survey responses are divided by a slant mark (/). Each statement has six possible responses based on a Likert Scale (SD: Strongly Disagree, D: Disagree, DS: Disagree Somewhat, AS: Agree Somewhat, A: Agree, SA: Strongly Agree). The percentages are based on the number of participants compared with the number choosing the response. The pre-class survey had 43 participants whereas the post-class survey had only six participants respond. The poor post-class response disallows a meaningful comparison and a clear conclusion as to the increase in knowledge (if any) of the participants.

Table A2. Pre- and post-class survey responses

SCALE	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
STATEMENT No.	PRE/ POST	PRE/ POST	PRE/ POST	PRE/ POST	PRE/ POST	PRE/ POST
1	-	-	-	-	12%/-	88%/ 100%
2	-	-	-	12%/-	30%/ 33%	58%/ 67%
3	-	-	-	2%/	21%/ 17%	79%/ 83%
4	-	-	-	-	14%/-	84%/ 100%
5	-	-	-	-	7%/-	93%/ 100%
6	35%/-	19%/ 33%	12%/ 33%	7%/-	7%/-	21%/ 33%
7	-	-	-	19%/ 17%	37%/-	44%/ 83%
8	2%/-	-	-	-	16%/-	81%/ 100%
9	-	-	-	5%/-	26%/ 33%	70%/ 67%
10	58%/-	23%/ 50%	7%/ 33%	7%/-	5%/ 17%	-/-
11			2%/ 14%	2%/-	26%/ 14%	70%/ 71%
12	19%/-	5%/-	7%/ 14%	9%/-	43%/ 43%	16%/ 43%
13	16%/-	21%/-	5%/ 17%	14%/ 33%	28%/ 33%	16%/ 17%
14	5%/-	12%/ 33%	5%/ 17%	26%/ 33%	23%/-	26%/ 17%
15	23%/-	33%/ 33%	5%/ 50%	14%/-	14%/-	9%/ 17%
16	5%/-	12%/ 67%	2%/-	5%/-	51%/ 17%	26%/ 17%
17	2%/-	30%/ 80%	2%/-	7%/-	26%/-	26%/ 20%
18	47%/-	42%/ 71%	2%/ 29%	2%/-	2%/-	5%/-
19	2%/-	2%/33%	-	-	33%/ 17%	60%/ 50%
20	60%/-17%	26%/-67%	7%/ 17%	5%/-	-/-	2%/-
21	40%/ 33%	40%/ 50%	2%/ 17%	9%/-	2%/-	2%/-
22	14%/-	23%/ 20%	9%/ 20%	12%/-	21%/ 20%	16%/ 40%
23	44%/ 33%	35%/ 33%	5%/ 33%	7%/-	7%/-	-/-
24	-/-	-/-	-/-	5%/-	44%/ 83%	47%/ 17%
25	-/-	-/-	2%/-	-/-	19%/ 33%	79%/ 67%
*Some participants did not respond to all statements						

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ABSTRACT

ESTABLISHING THE NEW MEMBER ASSIMILATION PROCESS OF AIRPORT BAPTIST CHURCH, GREER, SOUTH CAROLINA

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The purpose of this project was to establish the assimilation process of Airport Baptist Church by introducing changes that will ultimately result in an increase in the number of new members actively participating in the mission of the church. The first chapter is an introduction to Airport Baptist Church, its pastor and people, and the potential opportunities to impact its community. Chapter 2 provides an exegetical study of several Old and New Testament examples of God's people encountering and assimilating outsiders. Common challenges to, as well as best practices for, assimilation are described in chapter 3. Chapter 4 is a review of the process whereby the project was conducted, and chapter 5 contains my evaluation of the project.

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AS, Jones College, 1980

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Minister of Youth, Calvary Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, 1981

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