

# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

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## A Narrative, Missional Approach to Discipleship and Spiritual Growth

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# DISCERNMENT

*Theology and the Practice of Ministry*

## A Narrative, Missional Approach to Discipleship and Spiritual Growth

*Travis A. Sharpe*

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**Abstract:** *All Christians have the desire to grow in faith and knowledge of God. The difficulty is that most do not have the tools to help them accomplish the task. While churches desire to help their members grow in faith, many have never created an intentional plan to make spiritual formation possible. While there are a multitude of ways this could be accomplished, one avenue would be for churches to implement an intentional discipleship program. A discipleship program that combines a missional/narrative reading of scripture with spiritual disciplines has been shown to help participants grow in spiritual formation and join the mission of the God in the world. By combining a curriculum that helps members understand the grand story of the world, from creation to new creation, and how God is writing them into the story to enable them to join God's mission of reconciliation (while also encouraging spiritual disciplines), the church empowers participants to combine both the head and heart in order to experience the Spirit's transformation. This program has been shown as one way to help lead members of a local congregation into deeper love of God and others.*

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### The Problem

Mission statements for many churches are focused on various forms of spiritual growth. Sometimes the mission is clearly stated; other times it is ambiguous. Churches will speak of leading members into a deeper knowledge of God in order to send them out into the world to serve in the name of Jesus. Some of these statements are wordy paragraphs that are difficult to remember, while others are catchy phrases that fit nicely on the church's webpage. Whether specifically said or simply implied, churches want their members to grow spiritually.

The problem is that many churches have nothing in place to lead toward spiritual growth, and no real way of evaluating if growth has taken place. Many churches depend on the preacher or the education ministry to help guide curriculum for sermons and Bible classes. Some churches will

even incorporate small group curriculum or other ways of teaching their members. Ministers will design service projects to reach the community while encouraging members to love and serve their neighbors. While all of this is happening, leaders are left wondering if anything is making a difference. Even when churches are highly coordinated in their offerings, most lack data connecting their programs to member growth.

Part of the issue revolves on the difficulty of measuring spiritual growth. How does one determine if spiritual growth has taken place? Physical growth can be measured in inches and pounds, but spiritual growth is more nebulous. What is growth for one person may not be growth for another? While increased Bible reading or church attendance could be signs that growth is occurring, they in themselves do not prove that growth has taken place. To add to the confusion, spirituality involves all of life. God works through formal church programs and teaching, but God also works through life events, relationships with others, and individual experiences. Because of these difficulties, many church leaders are at a loss to know which activities, programs, or life situations are causing growth to occur and which are not.

### **A Possible Solution**

A possible solution would be for church leaders to implement, or provide, a discipleship program that leads toward spiritual growth.<sup>1</sup> Since spiritual growth encompasses multiple dimensions of one's life, this program would need to find a way to combine knowledge and experience. It must be more than just a Bible class (although it could occur during a Bible class setting) because it would require a commitment to regular participation both in class and in practicing and implementing the teachings during the week. In many ways, it would be an attempt to disciple and mentor Christians into deeper faith, hoping they would be transformed more into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18). Thus, through an ongoing discipleship program that combines a missional/narrative reading of Scripture with an emphasis in spiritual disciplines, members would have the opportunity to open themselves to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and allow the Spirit to guide them to a deeper love of God and others.

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<sup>1</sup> The complete project is found in: Travis A. Sharpe, "Discipleship Programs and Spiritual Formation: Does a Discipleship Program at GraceBridge Church Combining a Missional/Narrative Hermeneutic with Spiritual Disciplines Lead to a Noticeable Change in the Love of God and Others?" DMin project thesis (Lipscomb University, 2015).

## Theology

Humans find meaning in their lives through a narrative framework in which the events of life can only make sense within a larger story that provides context and meaning. Humans develop meaning in life based on the broader framework created through the story they live out. This framework often forms at an early age and is assumed as normative, so much so that it is rarely questioned. Most humans go through life unaware of this driving narrative, so it is extremely powerful. Many decisions that are made in life are based, consciously or unconsciously, off the story that is providing meaning for life. Leslie Newbigin even goes so far as to say that “the way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story. What is the real story of which my life story is a part? That is the question that determines what we believe.”<sup>2</sup>

What Christians must believe is that the story of God contained in Scripture is actually the true story of the world. The story of God in Scripture is not just a story among other stories, but as Christopher Wright says Scripture “is *the story*, the ultimate and universal story that will ultimately embrace the whole of creation, time, and humanity within its scope.”<sup>3</sup> It is only in embracing the story of God in Scripture as the grand narrative of the world that Christians can learn to embrace the call God has for their lives. It is in embracing this true story that one learns to live into the mission of God. Part of the role of spiritual formation is for individuals and communities to find themselves narrated into the great story of Scripture: to allow the great story of Scripture to so intersect their lives that it shapes their individual stories. It is at the intersection of these two stories, our individual stories and the great story of God in Scripture, that God meets us and shapes us into participants who are ready to join God’s mission in the world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Horkoff Mutch, “Shaped by the Story: Narrative, Formation, and the Word,” *Conversations* 3 1 (Spring 2005): 64.

## The Story of Scripture

The story of Scripture, therefore, is important, not just the individual stories told in Bible classes, but the continuous narrative from creation to new creation. We will tell this grand story in six distinct acts.<sup>5</sup>

**Act one is creation.** God creates a world to be in relationship with it. God creates so that God can share love with God's creation. Humanity is the crown jewel of creation. As made in God's image, humanity serves as God's representative in God's creation. The creation is good.

**Act two is the fall.** Sin enters the story and distorts the relationship between God and God's creation. God had intended to rule the creation, but sin allows humanity to try to serve as supreme, determining good and evil. Sin disrupts all of God's relationships with the creation.

**In act three, redemption is initiated.** God refuses to allow sin to destroy God's goal of sharing love with the creation, so God begins the process of redemption. The process begins through one family: the family of Abraham. God chooses Abraham to be a blessing to the rest of the creation, an instrument for God to use to save the world. The process begins with Abraham's family, later a collection of tribes, and finally through a united and then divided Kingdom. While God accomplishes much good, the rise and fall of Israel was never the final act of the play, just the initiation.

**In act four God accomplishes redemption through Jesus.** Humanity could not be redeemed on its own. God loved the creation enough that God chose to live in and among the creation. In Jesus, God takes on flesh, suffers with and for the creation in order to redeem the creation. In the coming of Jesus, God's reign and rule begins to break in. In the coming of Jesus, God's Kingdom breaks in as an already/not yet reality. Through Jesus's life, God begins to overcome the chaotic forces of sin. Through the death and resurrection, God destroys the curses of sin and allows redemption to be realized by humanity. Through the resurrection God declares God's ultimate victory over sin and allows humanity to begin living a real and full life now. The resurrection is a sign that God is in the process of making all things new.

**Act five is the mission of the church.** God's effort to restore God's relationship with creation that began with the family of Abraham and continued in the life of Jesus now becomes the mission of the church. God

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<sup>5</sup> These acts are based on work done by Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The True Story of the Whole World: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Resources, 2009).

has chosen to work through God's image bearers to be a blessing to the rest of the world. Jesus accomplish redemption, and that redemption needs to be shared with the rest of creation. The creation is still groaning in anticipation of renewal. Sin, while defeated, still is a force in the present culture.

Christians and the church have the opportunity to join God in what God is doing to redeem and restore the world. The task of the church is to continue the work of Jesus: to live as an alternate community in sight of the dominant culture in order to witness to the coming reign and rule of God. The task of the church is to live a proleptic ethic,<sup>6</sup> living New Jerusalem ideals in the midst of Fallen Babylon. We today find ourselves partnering with God to bless the creation if for no other reason than to share God's love with God's creation. For Christians, eternal life is not only a promise that we can go to heaven when we die, but an invitation to live now as if heaven is already realized. We can live the ideals of the Kingdom now even though the Kingdom has not fully come.

**The final act is the new creation when God secures the ultimate victory.** God longs to be in fellowship with God's creation. God created to share love with God's creation. Even though sin severed the perfect world God created, God was not content to allow the separation to remain. God was always going to restore the creation to the pristine state: to once again declare that it is very good just like it was in the beginning. In the final act of the story, God will create a new heaven and earth. In the final act of the story, God will once again reign and rule over all of God's creation. No part will be in rebellion to God. All segments will be living under God's rule. The redemption God accomplished through the life of Jesus will be fully realized. And just as God rested on the seventh day to enjoy fellowship with the creation, God will rest again for all eternity to enjoy fellowship with the recreation. As it was in the beginning, the creation will return to a perfect world.

Reading the Bible through a narrative lens like the one proposed above will help Christians not only understand the story of Scripture better, but will also help them find their place in that continuing story. It is

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<sup>6</sup> The word proleptic carries the meaning of living now as if a future event has already occurred. It is recognizing that the future is certain to the point that one can live now as if the future has already taken place. Christians believe that God will be victorious and that one day God will create a new Heaven and new Earth. Because Christians believe in God's ultimate victory, they live out God's kingdom now, even though it is not yet a full reality. A proleptic ethic is living out God's ideal for the new creation, even in the midst of a world that is still marred by sin.

important to see this story as one in which the unifying theme is God's mission to be in relationship with, and to reign and rule over, the creation. God's mission is to lead the creation to the life God always wanted for it. This life must be holistic; not just evangelism, but seeking justice and mercy in and for all aspects of the creation.

This has implications for how one views the local church. The church's central calling is not protecting the saved or even evangelism, it is to be a light to the nations. If the church loses this central story, the church will lose its focus. The church must find itself as God's people living in God's way as an example for the rest of the world. To help accomplish this task, God sends the Spirit as a crucial component of this calling. The Spirit is crucial in seeking and reaching the world and the Spirit's continual ministry is vital for the church to participate in the mission of God. As Michael Goheen states, "mission is the presence of God's people in the midst of the world and the powerful presence of God's Spirit in the midst of his people for the sake of the world."<sup>7</sup>

Scripture closes with the mission incomplete, while contemporary believers await God's final act. It is the job of those living now to join God and participate in God's ongoing mission to redeem and restore creation. The mission is God's and God will ultimately bring it to completion, but humanity is invited to participate in that mission. As individuals place themselves under the reign and rule of God, they become participants in God's ministry of reconciliation with the world. As one lives into this calling it results in Christlikeness, or being transformed into the image of God. This is the task of spiritual formation.

### Spiritual Formation within the Story

Spiritual formation is a continuous response to God shaping individuals into the image of Christ, through the power of the Spirit, within a faith community, for the sake of the world. Spiritual formation is not something that individuals can accomplish on their own, it is transformation from God.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the process does involve intentional action. The goal is to become more like Christ, specifically the cruciform life. The inward journey must lead to the outward journey.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 197.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey P. Greenman, "Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective," in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 23-35.

It is helpful to view spiritual formation through the lens of mission. Spiritual formation that views the personal growth of the individual as the goal, while helpful, does not lead one into a position to join God's mission to the world. God created in order to be in relationship with the creation, and once sin enters the world, will send the Son, the Spirit, and the church to be a witness to the world of God's willingness to renew relationship with the creation. Spiritual formation is then a process of growing in relationship with God for the sake of the world.<sup>9</sup> The Trinity is an essential component of spiritual formation.<sup>10</sup> The Trinity is both relational and substantive. It is a community that is outward focused. Father, Son, and Spirit share love with each other but also share love outside of each other to have relationship with the world. Spiritual formation must mold individuals into the image of the Trinity. It must involve love of God and love of others. God's love is focused outward, so Christians who are spiritually formed in the image of the Trinity will be focused outward as well.

Not only does the Trinity help guide spiritual formation, Scripture also guides spiritual formation. The Bible's very claim is that its words are active and useful for teaching and leading to righteousness, thus the Bible must be taken seriously as a tool for spiritual formation. The way one reads Scripture is important.<sup>11</sup> Scripture is not just a way to pass on information, but should be read for transformation. Scripture reveals God to its readers and challenges its readers to follow the way of Christ and enter Kingdom life, which involves becoming like Christ as well as living out the ethic of Christ.

Eventually, spiritual formation must lead to discipleship or it has no real benefit. In this sense, we should view discipleship through the lens of a missional God who both calls and sends.<sup>12</sup> Discipleship is not about the individual, but can only be accomplished through the work of God. God calls humanity and communities to Godself for praise and obedience and then sends those same persons back into the world to engage in justice and mercy. Spiritual formation and mission therefore cannot be separated but

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<sup>9</sup> Dwight J. Zscheile, "A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation," in *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation*, ed. Dwight J. Zscheile (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 1-28.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard E. Hjalmanson, "A Trinitarian Spirituality of Mission," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6, 1 (2013): 93-108.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Evangelism and Discipleship: The God Who Calls, the God Who Sends," *Word and World* 24 2 (Spring 2004): 121-135.



are eternally bound in the life of the believer.<sup>13</sup> Humans bear the image of God. As humans embrace that image-bearing role, they participate with God in serving the creation. Just as God seeks to love and redeem the creation, humans, as God's image bearers, join God in this mission to the world. God's love is a cruciform love, freely given for the sake of the world. As the Trinity forms humans into the image of God, they too must incarnate cruciform love in their relationships with others. Spiritual formation is always for the sake of the world as mission naturally flows out of one's identity in Christ.

Ultimately, spiritual formation is the process in which over time the Holy Spirit reshapes and redevelops individuals more into Christ-likeness.<sup>14</sup> It begins at salvation and leads one into Kingdom life. As such, salvation begins now, and part of following Jesus is learning to obey all of the time. Transformation involves getting to a point where obedience is natural. It is new life. God is at work in the individual, molding and shaping one's life, inviting one to join God in God's mission to the world.

### **The Program**

A twenty-six-week discipleship program combining a missional/narrative reading of Scripture with an emphasis in spiritual disciplines was my design for an intervention intended lead participants to deeper faith. The curriculum for the program followed the six acts discussed earlier (from creation to new creation) with homework being given each week to practice a spiritual discipline related to the topic discussed in class. I offered the class during the Sunday morning Bible Class time to anyone who wanted to attend. Those who participated in the research were volunteers from the group that regularly attended. No one was forced to participate.

The classes followed a typical format. We devoted the majority of class time to discussing the main topic of emphasis each week. I wrote out class notes word for word, but often only covered the highlights during class time while allowing for questions and discussion. I provided copies of the full class to class participants at the conclusion each week for further study. In the final moments of class each week, I described the spiritual discipline to be practiced as homework and provided tips to help facilitate

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<sup>13</sup> M. Robert Mulholland, "Spiritual Formation in Christ and Mission with Christ," *The Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 6 1 (2013): 11-17.

<sup>14</sup> Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation," in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and George Kalantzis (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 45-60.

a better experience.<sup>15</sup> If time allowed, participants would practice the discipline together, with encouragement to practice it again individually during the week. I allotted time at the beginning of class the following week to review homework and discuss everyone's experiences.

We evaluated the program in two ways. Quantitatively, we asked participants to complete a pretest and a posttest that could be analyzed against each other to determine if growth had occurred. The Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale developed by Lynn Underwood<sup>16</sup> was the instrument for the pre and posttest. Qualitatively, I developed a four question interview sheet allowing for open-ended answers. The hope was that this type of interview would allow participants to share stories of spiritual growth from the previous six months. Once the program was completed, I analyzed the data obtained from the pre and posttests, as well as the interviews, to determine the outcome of the program.

The first two weeks of the class focused on introductory issues. The first week was an encouragement to read the Bible not just for information, but for formation. The second week focused on an overview of the story of Scripture and the importance of reading Scripture as a whole and not just in sections. As homework, participants were encouraged to practice *lectio divina*<sup>17</sup> to help them slow down to hear a word from the Lord.

The next three weeks were focused on creation. God created all that is. This truth is the foundation of the creation narrative, and the basis of week one of the curriculum. God is wholly other, and yet chooses to, and desires to, interact with the creation. God created in order to be in relationship with the creation. The second week was a reminder that the

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<sup>15</sup> There are many excellent works which describe various spiritual disciplines and provide tips for practicing them effectively. A few were particularly helpful for the project: Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005); Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th Anniversary Edition (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998); Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> The Daily Spiritual Experiences scale is copyrighted by Lynn Underwood and was used by permission. For more information about the scale including validity and interpretations see [www.dsescala.org](http://www.dsescala.org) and Lynn Underwood, *Spiritual Connection in Daily Life: 16 Little Questions That Can Make a Big Difference* (West Conshohocken PA: Templeton Press, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> While some of the previously mentioned works discuss *lectio divina*, deeper study can be found in: Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988); Peterson, *Eat This Book*.

creation is good. What God created was good. All of the creation is good. While evil distorts it, the creation is still good. Finally, a week was spent on the culmination of creation, humanity. The Creator made humanity in the image of God, created to represent God and serve in a ruling function over the creation. Humanity is to care for the creation as God cares for the creation. Homework during these weeks encouraged participants to go on a nature walk, participate in some form of creation care, and dwelling in the creation narratives. These activities allowed participants to experience creation in a way drawing them closer to God.

The class also dedicated three weeks to the fall, and the changes brought about because of sin. The first week focused mainly on the episode in Genesis 3 and how sin brought shame to humanity. The introduction of sin distorted humanity's relationship with God and brought chaos back into God's good creation. The second week's lesson defined sin as a decision to choose one's own way over God's. Sin is a power struggle, with humanity trying to wrestle control away from God. Ultimately, sin is idolatry, taking God off the throne and placing self on the throne. The final week was a reminder that, even with sin's powerful destruction, God was not content to allow sin to reign. From the beginning God was working toward redemption. Even as humanity sinned, God provided relief. God would not abandon humanity; forgiveness was coming. For homework, I encouraged participants to spend time fasting, learning to lament their own sins, and also using breath prayers (one-line prayers repeated continuously, such as "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner") to recognize their sinfulness and God's gift of forgiveness.

The curriculum next moved into act three, redemption initiated, and the stories of Abraham and Israel. The class spent two weeks on Abraham and the promises God made as well as the role of blessing as a way for God to provide for the creation. God blesses Abraham so that Abraham can live into his calling as God's representative of blessing of others. Abraham is blessed so that he can bless others and help them live into their calling as God's image bearers. Over the next four weeks, four major events from Israel's history were examined: exodus, Sinai, the monarchy, and exile. The exodus was the major defining moment for Israel as God saved Israel from slavery and brought it into covenant relationship. God ratified this covenant at Sinai, as God challenged Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The monarchy provided a reminder that the role of the king was to make it easier for others to see God, while the exile provided a conflict as Israel had to determine how to best follow God in a foreign land. Many of these episodes dealt with core issues that affect humans today. As

the class focused on Israel, they also focused on themselves. As homework, I encouraged participants to spend time meditating on God's law while also practicing the discipline of simplicity as a reminder that God is what we need, not our possessions.

Act four, redemption accomplished, focused on the life of Jesus for five weeks. The first week focused on the birth of Jesus, how the coming king threatened the existing powers, and proved that God is ultimately in control. The second week focused on the inauguration of Jesus's ministry in Luke 4, and how Jesus's ministry was not just getting people to heaven, but about creating a world of justice now. As homework, I asked participants to brainstorm ways they could bring justice to the world and to act on these plans. The next week focused on Jesus's ministry as a witness to God's reign, in both the things Jesus said and the miracles he performed. The final two weeks on the life of Jesus concentrated on his passion; including events leading up to the cross as well as the final week. Jesus redefined what it meant to be Messiah: dying for the people. Jesus was offering an alternative to the power brokers of the world. In so doing, Jesus offered all disciples a new calling, to follow the Messiah in self-sacrifice for the world. The resurrection then becomes a sign that the new creation has come and is coming at the same time. The New has broken into the old.

Class the next two weeks focused on the fifth and sixth acts of the narrative. The fifth act, the mission of the church, focused on the book of Acts, while the next week focused on the new creation. God is moving history toward an intended goal. Nothing can stop this movement of history because God is the one in charge. God created to be in relationship, and even when humanity sinned and caused disruption in the plan, God sought redemption and restoration of the entire creation. God has enacted this plan throughout the history of the world, and one day it will find fulfillment in the new creation.

In light of God's secure victory, I spent the final weeks encouraging participants to live as members of the Kingdom now. The first week was a reminder that good news is more than just a future salvation, but the reality that the arrival of the kingdom brings cosmic renewal in the present time. As the church shares good news, it must share a message that seeks for all things in this world to be restored and renewed so that they can resume their God-ordained purpose. The second week was a reminder that Christians are invited to join God's mission to the world; to do in our time and place what Jesus did in his. God calls Christians to witness about all that they have seen and heard. The third week centered on avoiding idolatry, which happens when humans find their identity or completion in

anything outside of God. A fourth week was an encouragement that participation with God requires spiritual formation. We, as Christians, cannot participate with God in God's mission if we are not being spiritually formed into the image of Christ. The final lesson was an encouragement to live into the story of God. To recognize that just like the heroes of Hebrews 11, we may not know the specific details of the future, but we know the final outcome. We are called to live faithfully now as God's servants in the world.

### **The Results**

The discipleship program yielded growth that could be measured in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Quantitatively, growth took place from the beginning to the end as evidenced in the Daily Spiritual Experiences inventory that was used as a pre and posttest. Most notably, growth was evidenced in answering the question, 'How close do you feel to God?' In the pretest, only 13% responded as feeling 'very close to God', with 80% feeling 'somewhat close'. No one reported feeling 'as close to God as possible'. In the posttest, however, 13% reported being 'as close to God as possible', and another 38% reported being 'very close to God'. While 50% of respondents still felt only 'somewhat close to God' or 'not at all close', the results seemed to indicate some progress in growing closer to God took place because of time spent in the program.

Qualitatively the results were clearer. Admittedly, many participants in their interviews spoke of still having much work to do, and not feeling adequate when it comes to their spiritual lives. Yet their answers revealed a different story of the changes that had taken place over the past few months. Many commented on how they were trying to slow down more and read Scripture in a way that was transforming. One spoke of a growing feeling that God was calling him to be more involved in his local community for good. A school teacher admitted to spending more time recognizing the beauty of creation on his daily commute to school, while a young mother spoke of noticing the beauty of the flowers in her neighborhood while she walked her son in the stroller. A businessman described how he had determined to pick up trash on the way from where he parks to his office building downtown as a means of caring for the creation. Another found a way to share part of his home broadband service with families in third world countries who do not have enough Internet access as a means of offering justice to those who do not have as much. Thus, while individuals often could not see growth in themselves, many

spoke of more fully living into the mission of God after being encouraged by the curriculum and homework assignments from the program.

One of the more interesting stories came from a man who has eaten breakfast at the same restaurant for almost ten years. He typically ate breakfast by himself, but because of the encouragement of the program, has begun trying to develop relationships with others that frequent the same restaurant. Because of these extra efforts, he has had the opportunity to speak about faith on multiple occasions with a man in his fifties who has given up on religion, and he has prayed with one of the workers after finding out her daughter was just diagnosed with cancer. As he said in the interview, "God is everywhere. Now that I'm being encouraged to look for God and opportunities, I see them all around me. They've always been there; I just wasn't paying attention until now."

### **Looking to the Future**

As leaders of churches seek ways to help guide members into deeper faith and transformed lives, a discipleship program like the one described above is a valuable tool. Admittedly, spiritual growth is hard to measure. It is possible that this type of growth would have taken place in any intensive Bible class setting. Yet, it must be admitted that, although many of the participants have been in church programs all of their lives, they have never been equipped to see God all around them and find their purpose in joining God's mission. As multiple members stated, having a full picture of the story of God, from creation to new creation, and being encouraged to develop a practices in spiritual disciplines, has helped to both understand and appreciate God more.

Church leaders need to find ways to lead members into deeper faith. Standard practices of Bible classes and sermons, while also encouraging service opportunities, are helpful, but finding more intentional ways to disciple is a necessity. The world needs disciples who are seeking deeper relationship with God. Leaders in churches have a responsibility, and in some ways will be judged by God, to provide ways for members to grow in faith.

The program described above is not perfect, and needs to be adjusted for different contexts. Ministers may need to change individual lessons in order to more fully explain the story of Scripture. Individual lessons ideally need more time than a typical forty-five-minute Bible class time allows. A small group of eight to ten working through the lessons as a committed group over a twelve to eighteen-month timeframe could yield great results. It would also be important to provide ways for participants to be

encouraged to continue disciplines even after the specific program has ended so that transformation continues. All of these issues can be resolved. The important aspect is for churches to do something to help members seek transformation.

God created in order to be in relationship with the creation. Even when humanity sinned and distorted that relationship, God was not content to abandon humanity, but has been actively seeking restored relationship with the creation. That plan has stretched throughout all of history and will someday find its fulfillment in the new creation. As humans, we are being narrated into this great story; finding our place as participants in the mission of God. As we become transformed, from one degree of glory to another, into the image of Christ we join God in God's mission to the world. Leaders in churches must help their members recognize and accept this calling, guiding them into deeper faith for the glory of God.

*Travis A Sharpe is a husband, a father, and a minister, but most importantly a follower of Jesus. He has been in full time ministry since 2000, serving as both a youth minister and preaching minister. Currently, he is serving as the preaching minister of GraceBridge Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Travis holds the Doctor of Ministry in Missional and Spiritual formation and also the Master of Divinity degrees, both from Lipscomb University. He has a passion for helping others find meaningful ways to connect with the life-giving power of God. In his spare time, he enjoys running, reading, following New York Yankees baseball, but most of all, spending time with his beautiful wife and three amazing children.*