Formulating A Covenant Of Discipleship For The Membership Of The Gwinnett Church of Christ

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ABSTRACT

This project addressed the lack of a covenant of discipleship for the membership of the Gwinnett Church of Christ (GCC). The purpose of the project was to develop such a covenant document to help all the members of GCC better live out the process of becoming more like Jesus. To provide a theological foundation for this project, I explored discipleship in the exhortation sections of the book of Hebrews, which specifically addresses the need for greater commitment and intentionality amongst a community of faith. I also explored the theoretical framework of how formulating a discipleship covenant document could create progress in the church system that is GCC. The intervention itself included a purposive sample of GCC’s members who studied the text of Hebrews together, reflected on the process of discipleship, and then formulated a covenant of discipleship to be used by the congregation as a whole. The covenant document itself intentionally utilizes language of acknowledgement in which we recognize that the process of discipleship is a work of God’s Spirit and that, as followers of God, it is our responsibility to listen to God’s voice and then, through the Spirit’s power, follow in the way of Jesus. Finally, I evaluated the success of this project and proposed future work necessary to continue assisting GCC in its mission of producing disciples of Jesus.
FORMULATING A COVENANT OF DISCIPLESHIP FOR THE MEMBERSHIP OF
THE GWINNETT CHURCH OF CHRIST

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Doctor of Ministry

By

David Chisholm

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To my parents, who not only instructed me in discipleship to Jesus but also modeled for me the profound impact that working faithfully as a ministry couple can have on a community of faith; to Rachael, who has always encouraged me in ministry, has been my partner, and who continually teaches me more about what it means to love Jesus; to my older son, Lucas, who has endured unimaginable struggles and yet continues to face each day with a smile on his face and love in his heart; to my younger son, Samuel, who exemplifies the child-like faith that Jesus insisted was essential to life in the kingdom; to the people of GCC, who graciously continue to pour out love on me, my family, and the surrounding community; thank you.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This project thesis addresses the ministry intervention that culminated in the crafting of a covenant of discipleship. This covenant document was created for the purpose of facilitating the discipleship process amongst the members of the Gwinnett Church of Christ. Chapter 1 provides a thick description of the ministry context as well as a statement of the project’s problem and purpose. This chapter then proceeds to describe my assumptions, definitions, limitations, and delimitations. Chapter 2 sets forth the necessary theological and theoretical constructs essential to the intervention. Chapter 3 describes the methodology for the intervention itself, including the evaluation used. Within this chapter is a detailed description of the sessions themselves. Chapter 4 examines the qualitative evaluations generated from field notes, a participant–narrative questionnaire, and an independent expert. This thesis concludes with chapter 5, which considers the interpretations, trustworthiness, and significance of this project.

Title of Project

The title of this project is “Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship for the Membership of the Gwinnett Church of Christ.” This title clearly states that the end product of the project is a written document forming a covenant of discipleship. The context in which this document will function and the location of its creation are both the

1. Abbreviated throughout this document as GCC.
Gwinnett Church of Christ in Lawrenceville, Georgia. This title also states that the potential benefactors of the project are the members of GCC.

**Ministry Context**

The ministry context for this project is the Gwinnett Church of Christ. The primary inquiry method contributing to this context description is that of ethnography. Ethnography is a research method that invites people to share their stories and perceptions in an attempt to form a thick descriptive picture of a particular context. To gather these stories, I interviewed a number of people who represent a diversity of theological positions, age, gender, length of membership at GCC, ethnicity, and socio-economic status in an attempt to include a wide and deep perspective of life at GCC.²

The second source contributing to this congregational picture is the description of the ministry context written by Drew Gaylor for his doctoral project thesis in 2013.³ Of course, my own observations and experiences as senior pulpit minister also contribute to the following description.

GCC began as a church plant in 1995 after three families completed a discernment process in which they determined that a new congregation needed to exist in the fast growing area of Northeast Gwinnett County. Several families from other area churches joined the three original families, and the congregation soon leased a daycare facility for worship. The congregation grew to a size of approximately 70-90 members during these early years and remained relatively small until 2007, when GCC built a permanent facility, which it currently occupies. Upon moving into the permanent

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² Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice, an Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008). For a copy of the prompt questions I used to illicit stories, see appendix B.

building in 2007, the congregation enjoyed steady growth, and presently the church claims just over 200 members with an average Sunday morning attendance around 200. Three shepherds, ten deacons, two full-time ministers, and one part-time office administrator currently serve as the GCC leadership team. I joined the congregation in October of 2013 as the senior pulpit minister.

The official website for Gwinnett County states “Our dynamic and exciting county combines the best of big-city living with the comforts of the suburbs.” Located a short distance on I-85 northeast of Atlanta, residents of Gwinnett County embrace the cultural ethic that believes that the best life is a combination of regular involvement in exciting, dynamic activities and the pursuit of personal comfort. Consequently many of the families that constitute GCC embrace this ideology and are highly involved in time consuming extra-curricular activities such as sports, music, social clubs, and school board meetings. In conjunction with participation in these energetic and time-consuming activities, the pursuit of comfort leads many to a materialistic focus on self and a high resistance to sacrificial living.

Less than a block from the church building sits a new housing development with homes for sale in the $400,000-800,000 range, yet just a few blocks in the other direction an old trailer park deteriorates. The membership at GCC reflects this contrast of affluence and poverty, and the common desire of most people is to ascend to a higher economic status as a means of achieving the comforts of exciting, suburban living. This ideology of excitement and comfort, present in many North American congregations but particularly in suburbia, presents challenges for GCC, which seeks to impress upon members the

kingdom values of self-sacrifice and spiritual discipline. These kingdom values are
directly at odds with the suburban/American values and create an internal struggle in
GCC members seeking to live for both God and self.

One of the realities of Gwinnett County is that it is a community in which people
are accustomed to driving long distances, but are reluctant to get out in heavy traffic any
more than necessary.\(^5\) Atlanta, like many major metropolitan areas, has grown at a faster
rate than the surrounding infrastructure can accommodate; consequently, residents of the
area regularly endure long commutes and heavy traffic congestion.\(^6\) This spread-out
geography, coupled with congested traffic patterns, means that GCC has a number of
members who live a significant distance from the church building and interact with the
GCC family only for morning worship. While GCC will have roughly 200 people attend
morning worship, only between a third and a quarter of those attend Sunday morning
Bible class or the midweek gathering or participate in the connection group ministry.
Such a minimal amount of interaction with the GCC family presents challenges in trying
to disciple members and leads to an unintentional attitude that says that “church is
something we do for an hour on the weekend.”

Theresa F. Latini directly addresses this view of ecclesiology in her examination
of the loss of community throughout congregations in North America. She writes, “We
have a low ecclesiology. We view the church as merely an intentional gathering of
individuals, and so we freely leave congregations. Our denominational loyalties are weak

\(^5\) The average commute time in Gwinnett County is 32 minutes. Misty Williams, “How Long Is

\(^6\) One study from 2015 places Metro Atlanta at a rank of 12th worst city in the US for traffic
at best. We increasingly believe in God without belonging to God’s people.”\(^7\) Latini contends that our culture and churches currently experience a crisis of community\(^8\) that directly leads to catastrophic social problems. She states, “Many philosophers, sociologists, and theologians have attributed the loss of community to rampant individualism, narcissism, and myths of heroic self-sufficiency.”\(^9\) While GCC is a loving congregation that does well in providing opportunities to develop close relationships to fellow believers, the church still struggles with the rampant individualism and crisis of community poignantly highlighted by Latini. Most members at GCC consider the church to be an important component in their lives, but by their actions they demonstrate divided loyalties and inconsistent priorities.

Another part of what makes GCC unique is the large number of families present who carry emotional and spiritual scars from more legalistic congregations. In the area surrounding GCC a handful of congregations narrowly interpret Scripture’s teachings on issues such as divorce and remarriage, women’s roles, and even appropriate hair length. Numerous families come to GCC seeking a message of grace and acceptance, fleeing legalism. Every single person I interviewed as part of the ethnographic study identified GCC’s openness, love, and acceptance of diverse people as one of the congregation’s greatest strengths. Many members at GCC demonstrate such love and acceptance because

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8. In defining the crisis present in modern communities, Latini writes, “Disembedded from extended family, neighborhoods, and their own ethnic groups, people are left to establish and reestablish their own communities.” She believes that the church can play an essential role in providing true community, but congregations must first grapple with this crisis. Ibid, 36-37.

9. Ibid, 12.
they personally identify with the struggle to find grace and healing in a loving church family.

Part of the membership process at GCC requires prospective members to meet with the elders and ministers, and we regularly hear questions such as “Since I was divorced years ago, is it okay if I worship here? And if I do place membership here, will I be allowed to get involved in any of your ministries?” When such families hear of the openness with which GCC invites people regardless of their background to be a part of the congregation, these hurting families express vast amounts of gratitude and relief. For a significant percentage of GCC members, the primary reason they have chosen to be a part of the GCC family is that they were fleeing from legalism and looking for a place of healing and grace.

Unfortunately, because many people come to GCC seeking a spiritual hospital, they are often leery of making deeper commitments. Since congregations have hurt them before, people fear that they will experience hurt again, so maintaining a surface level commitment, such as only participating in Sunday morning worship, becomes preferable to getting more involved. Also, many people still recovering from the wounds inflicted at other congregations need more time to heal before they are emotionally and spiritually ready to engage fully in ministries and discipleship processes themselves.

Another hindrance to an intentional discipleship process at GCC is the diversity of theological backgrounds of the membership. GCC enjoys a large percentage of members who grew up either in another denomination or outside of church altogether.\textsuperscript{10} During one

\textsuperscript{10} Diana Butler Bass directly addresses the potential problems to a church presented by the growing theological diversity present throughout North American protestant churches. She writes, “Some Protestant pastors look at such diversity as a problem, bemoaning the decline of denominational identity and the rise of theological chaos.” She proceeds, however, to argue that such diversity instead pleases “a
recent interview with a pair of prospective members in their late twenties, the young man asked me, “What even is a Church of Christ?” The young man had never heard of Churches of Christ before coming to GCC even though he had been a baptized believer since his teenage years. Many of the members at GCC either do not know the basic foundational stories of the Bible, or they have a history of interpreting them from theological perspectives outside of the Stone-Campbell Movement. This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges. While some Churches of Christ still have the opportunity to intentionally engage in a discipleship process on the basis of everyone having a common experience growing up in Churches of Christ, no such shared foundation exists at GCC. Members coming from such a multitude of different spiritual places highlights the need for a more intentional process of discipleship.

One of the realities of GCC that presents a challenge to a congregational plan for intentional discipleship is the general laid-back spirit of its membership. Whereas other congregations place a greater emphasis on structure and punctuality, at GCC even amidst the hurried and overly busy major metropolitan area of greater Atlanta, members embrace a relaxed cultural ethos of resistance to structure. This translates into church life in such areas as Bible class and worship service times. At GCC on Sunday mornings at 9:30 a.m., when the scheduled starting time for Bible class arrives, the typical class will contain less than a handful of members. Recently when one visitor inquired about class start times at GCC, a staff member told him, “If you plan on showing up before 9:30, you’d better have


11. A good example of a congregation that still successfully engages in a discipleship process based on the majority of the membership’s sharing a common background in Churches of Christ is the Ridgecrest Church of Christ in Midwest City, Oklahoma, where my family raised me and where my parents still attend. In every church in which I have personally been a member, the congregation’s classes, sermons, and other educational opportunities assumed a Church of Christ theological consensus.
a key.” The normal Sunday morning routine involves class participants arriving anywhere from ten to twenty minutes late, and those attending the worship service itself trickle in over the course of the first twenty minutes or more of worship.

Not only does the relaxed spirit cut into the amount of time members spend in formal church activities when they attend, but this same attitude applies to attendance patterns in general. If school schedules, holiday plans, college football games, or other activities conflict with the church calendar, the majority of members will readily miss church activities in favor of social or entertainment options. If a holiday such as Columbus Day means that kids and parents will be free on a Monday, then the Sunday worship on the preceding day will almost certainly feel empty. This inconsistent attendance pattern amongst members makes continuity in teaching classes and sermons difficult. Often Bible class teachers are unable to ask “So, what did we talk about last week?” because so few of the current week’s attenders were there last week. All of this makes the process of discipleship difficult as members spread themselves out and limit the amount of time spent at church.

One helpful lens to better understand the culture of GCC is the lens of social game theory. This ethnographic practice seeks to understand groups based on how various interactions, such as authority, conflict, and work, fall on a four-part graph. Applied to GCC, the congregation plays all of its social games in the egalitarian quadrant. This means that the members of GCC resist authoritative structures (grid,

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12. Social game theory is an extensive field of study applicable to numerous social contexts. For a greater understanding of the types of questions and issues examined at GCC, see Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

13. Seven people participated in extensive social game theory interviews in the winter of 2015. See appendix D for a graph of the data for all social games studied.
measured vertically on the graph) and display a high allegiance to the GCC family (group, measured horizontally on the graph). Practically, this means that as a group GCC members enjoy being together and want to grow stronger as a family but tend to resist any appearance of authoritative structures that would restrict individual freedom. For example, in the summer of 2015, GCC introduced a new annual program for dedicating a Sunday to doing service projects in the community instead of gathering at the building for formal worship. The program achieved great success because (a) the members of the congregation chose their own projects and largely organized their own teams and (b) they had an opportunity to spend an entire day working together and growing closer as a church family. GCC functions most successfully as a low-grid, high-group community. Any process for intentional spiritual growth must therefore arise organically, not from the leadership but from the community, and it must also demonstrate a commitment to drawing GCC members closer together.

The cultural pressures facing GCC are not unique to this particular congregation; in fact, they can be found in congregations throughout North America. Nevertheless they make the process of discipleship difficult. At GCC the message of the gospel competes with the message that comfort, entertainment, and social advancement are the ultimate goals of life. People’s schedules are so busy, and members are spread out over such a large geographical area, that church becomes another item on a to-do list instead of the defining characteristic of life. Also, as North American culture becomes more varied, finding common backgrounds and meta-narratives on which to join with others on a journey of discipleship is increasingly problematic. Living as a disciple of Jesus has
always been countercultural, and this is just as true in present day Gwinnett County as it has been throughout the history of the church.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem of this project is the temptation GCC members face to lessen their commitments to Jesus. GCC is an amazing church full of loving people with great spiritual strengths and a heart for Jesus. Unfortunately, the temptation to lessen commitments to Jesus as a result of the surrounding cultural pressures causes the process of discipleship to largely progress informally and unintentionally. As a young, diverse congregation, GCC struggles to give proper consideration to an intentional process of discipleship. This project seeks to address this problem.

**Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to formulate a covenant of discipleship for the Gwinnett Church of Christ. To do this, I gathered a small team of thirteen people that reflect the great diversity present at GCC and led them through a focused study of the exhortations of the book of Hebrews. This study examined the rhetorical aims of Hebrews in order to establish a framework from which we then developed a one-page document that states in intentional ways the manner in which we conceive of living as disciples of Jesus as members of the Gwinnett Church of Christ. This covenant of discipleship considered and utilized the work done by Drew Gaylor and the leadership team at GCC in 2011, in which they formulated a covenant of discipleship specifically for the leadership team. At the time of that document’s formulation, the leadership stated a desire to one day create a similar document that would be simplified and applicable for all GCC members (they felt that the original covenant of discipleship was

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14. See appendix C for the “Covenant of Discipleship” for the GCC leadership team.
too long and unwieldy for practical implementation). This project sought to complete that work and provide the necessary tools to fully implement a covenant of discipleship.

**Basic Assumptions**

This project assumes that the process of catechesis does not end at baptism; rather, it continues throughout the life of every disciple of Jesus. Disciples cannot grow and mature in faith unless they intentionally engage in spiritual practices and also commit themselves firmly to a congregation of fellow disciples. This project also assumes that a communally discerned and implemented covenant of discipleship rooted in the theology of Hebrews will be a much more effective and powerful tool for spiritual growth than our current model of expecting each individual member to determine his or her own process for growing into the image of Jesus Christ. As a congregation we grow best when we grow together and when we grow with intentionality.

**Definitions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

Covenant: A covenant is a formal agreement between two parties. In this project a covenant is specifically an agreement in which people seeking to follow Jesus enter into a relationship with God in which God provides great blessings, such as hope, salvation, and the Holy Spirit, and the covenant people seek to live under the instruction and governance of God in a cooperative effort to fulfill the redemptive purposes of the kingdom of God.

Discipleship: Discipleship is the process by which followers of Jesus seek to grow spiritually to greater reflect the perfection of God. This is a formative process by which followers of Jesus change their attitudes, thoughts, actions, and personalities by the power of God’s Spirit to become more like Jesus.
Delimitations and Limitations: This project addresses only the formulation of a covenant of discipleship for the congregation at the Gwinnett Church of Christ. This document is delimited to those who have self-identified as GCC members and received a formal introduction into the GCC family, publically, by the GCC leadership team. This project also recognizes that the process of discipleship and spiritual growth happens in numerous ways as the Spirit of God works in the life of each believer and cannot be reduced to a list found in any document. This project attempts to provide an intentional covenant to facilitate the process of discipleship, not provide an all-inclusive means by which spiritual growth occurs.

Conclusion

This opening chapter introduces this project thesis. This chapter provides a specific view of the GCC context, states the problem that this contextual description reveals, and articulates the purpose of this project in creating a covenant of discipleship for the membership at GCC. GCC is a young, healthy church in need of a more formalized plan for viewing the formation of disciples, and this project seeks to address that need. Chapter 2 examines the theological and theoretical frameworks undergirding this ministry intervention and construction of the covenant document.
CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Each week during the call to worship, GCC recites its mission statement, “A loving family, living for God, serving our neighbors.” These three phrases seek to orient the community’s understanding of discipleship by intentionally committing to a strong relationship with one another, with God, and with the surrounding world. GCC believes that these three relationships defined the ministry and work of Jesus, and that becoming a follower of Jesus will mimic this relational life. In this chapter I examine the exhortation sections of Hebrews and how these exhortations provide a theological foundation for the development of an intentional covenant of discipleship for the members of GCC. By examining the exhortations of Hebrews, I demonstrate how formulating and implementing a covenant of discipleship is a helpful way of encouraging a community to remain faithful in its commitment to Jesus as Lord.

Theological Framework

Discipleship in Hebrews

While the term “disciple” and its cognates fill the pages of Matthew, Mark, John, and Luke/Acts, the writer of Hebrews never uses the expression. Yet though the preacher never explicitly mentions discipleship, the rhetorical aim of his homily (a midrash on Psalm 110) centers on the very nature of discipleship itself: encouraging Christians to become more committed followers of Jesus. Discipleship in Hebrews spans the entire thirteen-chapter sermon as the preacher exhorts his listeners to follow in the example of
Jesus, who suffered, persevered throughout all trials, demonstrated perfect virtue, and ultimately received God’s vindication and glory (cf. 2:9; 12:1-3; 4:15; and 1:3). Only by following the path of Jesus can the community achieve the longed-for rest in God’s glorious presence. Luke Timothy Johnson correctly posits, “The meaning of discipleship in Hebrews, then, is more than a matter of loyalty to the confession or the practice of virtue. It means walking in the path of transformation into true and mature children of God.”¹ While the term “disciple” never appears in Hebrews, this work uniquely functions as a foundational theology for a community seeking to understand what it means to follow Jesus and remain unwavering in that allegiance.

The Ancient and Modern Setting

The greatest, overriding danger threatening the original recipients of this homily is the temptation to fall away. The community experiences “feeble arms and weak knees” (12:12) with an inattention that can lead to members “drifting away” (2:1) from God, or even stronger, an outright sinfulness that will cause them to “turn away” (3:12) from God. Against some theories of interpretation, such as the scribe who first penned “To the Hebrews” as a title for the text, the call of Hebrews is not likely an exhortation to Jewish people tempted to turn to the synagogue as a haven of refuge from persecution.² Instead, this homily is an exhortation to a people struggling with the cost of discipleship and the lure of the false safety and security offered by society through lessening or even abandoning their commitment to Jesus and his church. The very real temptation facing

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² For a more thorough examination of the issues of interpretation both for and against a view of Hebrews as a warning against a return to Judaism, see Eric Farrel Mason, “The Epistle (Not Necessarily) to the ‘Hebrews’: A Call to Renunciation of Judaism or Encouragement to Christian Commitment?” *PRS* 37 (2010). Specifically note Mason’s final conclusion, “The theological danger is apathy and ultimately renunciation of faith, not an attraction to Judaism.” Mason, 20.
this struggling community is the temptation to count the cost of discipleship and choose the supposed easier life of living in conformity to the surrounding pagan culture.\(^3\) The sermon to the community is therefore a word of encouragement (cf. 13:22) to Christians who need to hear a word of reassurance aimed at bolstering faith and reminding them of the rewards available to those who will follow Jesus to the end.

DeSilva, who explored Hebrews using social-scientific categories, describes the overall purpose of the homily as an exhortation to the community to reestablish itself around the original apostolic call to exist as a subcultural group within a larger culture that does not honor God. He states that the preacher “seeks to reestablish them as a caring, vitally interacting group (plausibility structure) so that they might have the internal strength and mobilization of resources to reinvest in the group boundaries, to accept the ethos of a pilgrim people that refuses to belong in any sense to the social structures of the larger society and to accept the shame, abuse, and even hostile action with which the larger society will probably respond.”\(^4\) Hebrews utilizes numerous strategies to convince the readers that the benefits of continuing with the Christian community far outweigh the perceived gains of rejoining the surrounding pagan culture. These strategies aim at bolstering the strength of the struggling church.

The primary reason to use Hebrews as an encouragement for GCC, and many other contemporary Christian communities, is the striking parallel between their

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3. “The attractive pressures facing the audience of Hebrews should be associated with its imperial pagan context. Fear of reprisals (e.g., confiscation of property, imprisonment, torture) for the community’s Christian confession was clearly causing some in the community to consider whether suffering was worth the cost. Additionally, the temptation to identify with the pagan imperial culture and the affluence and safety it offered seems to have been the attractive element tempting the audience away from its exclusive loyalty to God and his son, Jesus.” Jason A. Whitlark, *Resisting Empire, Rethinking the Purpose of the Letter to “the Hebrews”* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 75-76.

respective situations. Both communities experienced an initial excitement as the community first formed, and both, as they entered into their second generation of life, felt that excitement fade as the realities of the daily grind began to overshadow the unseen “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly” (12:22). Both communities’ strongest temptation is not to abandon a belief in Jesus in favor of another religion, but rather to slowly fall away and give up on the importance of meeting together (10:25). Both communities ultimately question the cost of discipleship and desperately need an exhortation to reaffix their eyes upon Jesus.

In order to accomplish the rhetorical aim of reinvigorating this struggling community, the author of Hebrews invites his hearers to imagine themselves alongside ancient Israel, trudging through the desert on the way to the Promised Land. Only by enduring the journey and following the leader (or “pioneer,” 2:10), now Jesus, as the new Moses, can the community obtain the promised rest. The task of discipleship therefore is to follow Jesus through this path of suffering, which he opened through his own perseverance. The image of following our pioneer Jesus returns in 12:1-2 with an exhortation to “fix our eyes on Jesus,” and again in 13:11-13, in which disciples are to go to Jesus outside the camp, to the place he suffered, so that they might bear the disgrace he bore and join him in an enduring city that is to come.

As was true in the latter half of the first century CE, so it still remains true that any community looking for true hope and rest can find it only by following the suffering Jesus, finding him “outside the camp,” and understanding his role in the salvation history.

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5. William L. Lane, Hebrews: A Call to Commitment (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 23. “The Christians who are addressed in Hebrews were struggling with the cost of discipleship. Sometimes we find ourselves precisely in a similar situation. Whenever I find myself in that place I turn to Hebrews. There I am called to consider the cost of discipleship in the light of Jesus’ endurance of the Cross, and to affirm my identification with Jesus Christ.”
of God’s people. The superiority of Jesus rings throughout Hebrews not as a truth for intellectual acknowledgment, but as an encouragement to disciples to follow in the life of Jesus and keep a life of faith as the central priority of life.

Discipleship and Listening to God’s Voice

The opening exordium of the sermon to “the Hebrews” challenges the listeners/readers to hear God’s voice in a superior way to their Israelite ancestors of old. They heard through prophets on sporadic occasion, but now a word comes to the community of believers from God through his own son. This is the first example of many in the homily of the rhetorical strategy of *synkrisis*, a comparison of two separate things to emphasize the greatness of the speaker’s subject; if it was important, and it surely was, to listen when God spoke through prophets, how much more important is it for the people to listen to the greater voice of the son? This emphasis on the voice of God becomes explicit with the warning in the next section and the exhortation to “pay most careful attention” (2:1) to this word from God through the son.

Chapter 3 of Hebrews begins with a comparison of Jesus to one such prophet, Moses, emphasizing the greater honor and faithfulness of Jesus. To illustrate this point, the preacher quotes (not once, but twice) Psalm 95:7b-11, which constitutes an exhortation to God’s people to listen to God’s voice. The illustration provides a negative example for the preacher as he reminds his listeners that those who heard failed to truly listen and therefore rebelled (3:16). The consequence for failing to listen to Moses, the lesser prophet to Jesus, was nothing short of death. For the preacher, true faithfulness and

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6. “Exercises in *synkrisis* were a common feature in rhetorical education. Thus the author’s comparisons reflect not a polemic against Judaism but his desire to demonstrate the greatness of the Christian revelation.” James W. Thompson, *Hebrews*, PCNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 36.
discipleship begins (and has the possibility of ending) with whether a person/community chooses to hear the voice of God.

This theme of hearing God’s voice through his son achieves its coup de grȃce at the end of chapter 4, where the author states, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (4:12-13). This forms an inclusio with the opening line of the book and functions as an ending to the first section of the sermon. The emphasis on the word of God is far more than an encouragement for the community to spend more time studying Scripture; the sword confronts the community with a possible judgment from which there will be no hiding and will pierce the innermost being of every person. Thompson eloquently states, “The surgical capabilities of the word now confront the community that is faced with a decision about its response.” True disciples are those who give the correct account of following the more difficult path of Jesus.

Towards the end of his sermon, the preacher returns to the theme of listening to God through the son, this time through the blood sacrifice. In 12:24 the church that approaches the heavenly Jerusalem receives the appeal to listen to the “sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” This precedes a warning in the next verse not to “refuse him who speaks.” This exhortation follows the argument spanning chapters 7 through 10, which demonstrates the ultimate sacrifice and purification for sins offered by Jesus, which trumps any sacrifice made at an earthly temple using animals.

7. Thompson, Hebrews, 98.
Discipleship begins with listening to the voice of God spoken to the community through Jesus. This exhortation to listen appears throughout the sermon to the Hebrews and functions as a means by which followers of Jesus can persevere in faith. The next logical question for the would-be disciple then becomes: what does this voice from God say? Two themes dominate the divine voice to which faithful disciples should listen: warnings of danger and promises of reward.

Discipleship and the Danger of Falling Away

Much of the book of Hebrews constitutes a warning against falling away from faith in Jesus. The first major exhortation in the homily occurs in 2:1-4, where the admonition to pay attention is so that “we do not drift away” (2:1). The image here is that of a river that “flows by a place, or flows aside from its normal channel in the sense of flooding or escaping its channel.”8 Yet again the preacher points to the path disciples should take and warns against those who would leave that true path. Hearers can understand the seriousness of this warning against drifting by remembering the punishments God gave to those who ignored the lesser salvation offered by the messengers in earlier ages. Not only is the danger of drifting away very real for the community of believers, but the consequences include missing out on the ultimate salvation that comes only through Jesus.

The second major warning against falling away comes in a longer passage (3:7-4:11) that perfectly illustrates the previous point. Here the preacher reminds the community that even though the Israelites who experienced the exodus longed to know the peace and prosperity of the Promised Land, and even though they witnessed the mighty hand of God against Egypt, they were unable to enter this rest because of “sinful,

unbelieving hearts” (3:12). The preacher then explains that the reason these people failed to find rest is that even though they heard the word of God and understood it, they were unwilling to combine it with faith (4:2). True discipleship goes beyond merely hearing and understanding the word; it instead seeks to follow God in faith.

Again the preacher returns to the warning against falling away in the opening verses of chapter 6. After telling the community that they need to grow in maturity and progress beyond the milk of elementary teaching (5:11-14), he warns the community that anyone who falls away must realize the permanence of the decision. In one of the most controversial verses in the homily, the preacher says, “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened … if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance” (6:4-6). The reason for this is that they would be effectively asking for Jesus to go back to the cross and again suffer public disgrace. A few sentences later the preacher changes his tone and speaks his confidence of “better things in your case” (6:9), yet he goes on to state that this tragic loss of salvation can happen to those who become lazy in their faith (6:12). Disciples must understand the starkness of the choice before them.

The latter half of chapter 10 contains the fourth warning against a failure of faith. Here the community can expect “judgment and raging fire” (10:27) if they should reject the grace God offers through the Spirit. The preacher returns to this theme a final time in 12:25-29, where he promises no escape for those community members who “turn away from him who warns us from heaven” (12:25).

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9. This passage of Hebrews has frustrated commentators for centuries as theologians seek to harmonize this with a theology of ecclesial discipline and grace. Thompson correctly asserts, “The comment is most likely an example of what rhetoricians called a deinōsis, the attempt to shock the audience into listening to the speaker’s message.” Thompson, Hebrews, 124. It is important for the interpreter to remember that the preacher is not here concerned with the fate of apostates (after all, they have not yet fallen away), but rather with the present temptation of community members to leave the faith.
Ultimately disciples of Jesus must decide whether to continue in their initial decision to follow Jesus. The author of Hebrews repeatedly warns the community that the danger of falling away is not only very real, but also carries with it consequences of eternal proportions. Those who turn away from a commitment to Jesus face the loss of salvation, fiery judgment, the impossibility of coming back to Jesus, and the loss of the family benefits offered by the Christian community (cf. 6:4-8 and 10:26-31). Rhetorically, with these passages, the preacher seeks to impress upon his hearers the stakes involved in continuing as a disciple. The decision to press on toward greater maturity or to fall away is not something a disciple should approach casually or accidentally, but with sobriety of thought and a full knowledge of the importance such a decision entails.

While much of the word of God functions as a warning against falling away, the message spoken through Jesus also includes a more positive side. For those who would complete the journey of discipleship, become more like Jesus, and remain steadfast in the faith, Jesus promises great rewards.

Discipleship and the Rewards of Faith

One of the central images of Hebrews is the story of how the Israelites failed to enter the promised rest, but because Jesus is the new Moses, a greater Promised Land awaits the faithful disciple who is fully committed to following Jesus. Chapter 4 explains this image and quotes Psalm 95:7-8 as a means of assuring the community that God has made this rest available “today” for those who maintain faith (cf. 4:7-9). While the definitive fulfilment of this rest is available only after the struggles and sufferings of this life are over, there is within this promise a now/not yet dimension. Thompson correctly
argues that this promised rest is the equivalent of other images used throughout the homily to describe the hope that shapes disciples. Ultimately, God forms the community through an eschatological hope that brings the struggles of life into a proper focus. Disciples are an eschatologically hopeful people.

This exhortation to press on towards the promised rest leads the preacher directly into another reward of discipleship: the ability to approach God with confidence. In 4:14-16 the preacher states that since Jesus fully understands the community’s temptations and weaknesses, he is able, as high priest, to allow the community access to God’s throne where God makes available the mercy and grace necessary to continue as disciples. This theme returns in 10:19-25 where the preacher encourages his hearers to draw near to God with the knowledge that God cleanses consciences and instills hope. This theme also connects to the benefit of belonging to such a community that will then “spur one another on toward love and good deeds … encouraging one another” (10:24-25). The promise of God’s presence crescendos in 12:22-24, when the preacher reveals that not only do faithful disciples enjoy God’s presence, but they are also present to “thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,” “to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,” and finally “to Jesus.” To the disciples wavering in their commitment to Jesus, the preacher proclaims that the community visible in a little house church that seems so insignificant when compared to the gatherings in the surrounding culture is not the only community present. Disciples partake in the presence of God and in the throne room of God almighty.

10. Thompson, Hebrews, 96. Other terms include homeland (11:14), city (11:10-16; 12:22; 13:14), and an unshakable kingdom (12:28).
The word of God contains both warnings of the danger of falling away and promises of eternal rest and glory. The next step in the journey of a disciple is to experience present assurance in the validity of these promises. The author of Hebrews offers a guarantee to his flagging, weak-kneed hearers of the absolute fidelity of both the rewards and warnings because the foundation of this word is completely unassailable. God bases his promises to the church on the reality of a better covenant.

Discipleship and the Better Covenant

The use of *synkrisis* discussed above appears numerous times in Hebrews (chapters 6 through 10), highlighting the superiority and overwhelming importance of Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross.11 Jesus is the ever-reigning high priest (6:20), the guarantor of a better covenant (7:22), and the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice (7:26-27), and his worship takes place in the more perfect, heavenly tabernacle (9:11 and 24). This sacrifice provides his followers with a better hope (7:19), a covenant of the heart that imparts knowledge of God and forgiveness of sins (8:10-12), holiness, and a clean conscience (9:14). Because of this ultimate work of Jesus, disciples are now free from death and the sin that causes it, and they eagerly await the return of Jesus, who will bring salvation (9:28).

Rhetorically, this articulation of the better covenant functions to strengthen the ties between members of the Christian community. In an investigation of the setting of Hebrews utilizing sociological categories, DeSilva writes, “The carefully constructed argument about the ‘priest after the order of Melchizedek’ and the contrasts between

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11. Scholars debate the central idea or master emphasis of Hebrews, and many see the covenant/sacrificial language of chapters 7-10 as the doctrinal center of the book. For a good discussion of various interpretations and the correct conclusion of how the themes of Christ as high priest and the pilgrimage of the people of God intertwine and support each other, see David J. MacLeod, “The Doctrinal Center of the Book of Hebrews,” *BS* 146 (1989): 291-300.
priesthoods and sanctuaries and offerings all serve the end of necessitating faithful and confident participation in the Christian *ekklesia* as the best means of access to God. Thus the whole of the epistle, in effect, constitutes an antiphonal psalm between world-construction and ethos.\(^{12}\)

By highlighting the superiority of the sacrifice of Christ, the author of Hebrews creates an environment in which greater commitment to the Christian community and greater commitment to the life of discipleship become the only viable options available to his hearers.

When disciples understand that they belong to this new covenant, it changes the way they view all of life. Disciples’ identities are foundationally tied to their status as children of God and members of God’s people spanning millennia. The famous faith hall of fame found in chapter 11 further supports this idea that the disciples of Jesus are to view themselves as the continuation of an old thing, not the beginning of a new thing.

Yes, the covenant the community is a part of is new, but it is the fulfilment of God’s plan that began long ago. By highlighting the continuity of God’s people today, the preacher further encourages the community to stay the course.

**Discipleship and Endurance through Suffering**

The least pleasant, yet vitally important, aspect of discipleship articulated in the homily is the necessity of suffering. Luke Timothy Johnson accurately states how crucial suffering is to discipleship. He writes, “Hebrews challenges present-day sensibilities most of all by seeing suffering as the very heart of discipleship;… it is the very path by which humans become transformed, as was Jesus, into fully mature children of God.”\(^{13}\)

The preacher of Hebrews views suffering as unpleasant discipline dispensed from a loving

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father to train his children in righteousness and peace (12:4-11). Often Christians focus
only on the end of Jesus’s life as the time in which he suffered, but the life of Jesus was a
journey filled with times of struggle and hardship. This passage follows the great litany
of chapter 11 and the examples of the faithful through the ages who willingly embraced
faith in spite of any cost, including the cost of death. Suffering even taught Jesus
himself obedience that led to eternal salvation for those who would follow the path of
suffering (5:8-9).

Again, one of the overriding images of Hebrews is the image of Jesus as the
ultimate sin offering. In 13:11-14 the preacher states that just as the high priest carries the
body of the animal sacrificed at the temple outside the camp to burn, so too Jesus
suffered outside the city. True disciples will be those who join Jesus outside the camp and
willingly forego the comforts of a temporary city/camp for the city that will endure
forever. The preacher intentionally uses this image as the final metaphor of his sermon
because he knows the community’s primary struggle is with the loss of social
connections and properties caused by a commitment to the Christian community. By
reminding the community that they join with Jesus when they undergo such suffering, the

14. “The fact that Jesus suffered throughout his life is not something that we tend to think about or
dwell upon. Our tradition sometimes even intentionally obscures this element of Jesus's humanity. The
passion of Jesus begins at His birth. The ‘little Lord Jesus’ did in fact lay down ‘His sweet head’ away in a
Bethlehem manger, but the ‘little Lord Jesus’ who ‘no crying He makes’ is a Jesus who
never existed.” Ched E. Spelman, “When Hope Screams: Learning How to Suffer as Sons from the Book of Hebrews,”
SwJT 53 (2011): 114. This article goes on to enumerate various ways in which disciples identify and
become children of God through suffering as Jesus suffered. Suffering itself is a tool of discipleship.

15. “The final verses of the chapter continue the progressive intensification of the definition of
faith. The results of faith get more and more impressive: conquering kingdoms, victory against impossible
odds, receiving the dead back to life. But meanwhile its costs are spiraling out of control: persecution,
alienation, exile, the most gruesome of tortures—and finally martyrdom.” Alexander Loveday, “Prophets
and Martyrs as Exemplars of Faith,” in The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology (ed. Richard
author offers an outsider perspective that becomes not only preferable, but a mark that his readers are on the right track to following Jesus to perfection.

Discipleship and Virtue

This final chapter of the book contains a list of virtues essential to life in the Christian community, including sibling love, hospitality, sexual purity, contentment with possessions, willingness to follow church leaders, avoidance of ceremonial foods, and readiness to spend time in prayer. Undoubtedly the preacher never intended this list of virtues to function as an exhaustive catalogue of everything needed for discipleship, yet he does emphasize that if the hearers are to follow in the way of Jesus, they will live lives marked by virtue.16 In fact while this block of material might appear to be a random sampling of virtues, this “wide array of topics never departs from the author’s goal of moving the hearers to find the center that gives them stability and firmness in their Christian hope, thus also reliability in their relationship with, and obligations to, one another and Jesus.”17 These virtues emphasize the importance of the Christian community’s functioning as a family in which members treat one another as brothers and sisters so that they may press on toward the goal and encourage one another through suffering together.

Theological Conclusions

As the author of Hebrews seeks to encourage his audience to continue in the faith, he makes use of numerous themes that are essential to the disciple’s task of following

16. The preacher in fact begins his exhortation to virtue earlier in 12:14-17, in which he combines a warning against falling away with a plea for love among the brothers and sisters within the community. The ultimate goal of this passage is to encourage disciples to “work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord.”

Jesus. He exhorts Christians to listen to God’s voice, heed the repeated warnings against falling away, take hope in the rewards of faith, rest assured in the better covenant, endure suffering as an honor, and put on virtues for holy living. These themes work rhetorically in both ancient and modern contexts to help communities of faith reignite the earlier fire of their devotion and re-energize a people struggling to make Jesus their central priority.

**Theoretical Framework**

Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship as a Communal Activity

This exercise of creating a covenant of discipleship with a community of believers is a valid tool for discipleship and a life-giving exercise. Pat Taylor Ellison writes, “As creatures of the Creator, we have been given the Word within which we are to move, breathe, live, and talk together. Dwelling in God’s Word is a naturally coherent, aesthetic, even synergistic process within which all things are possible and nothing is impossible.”

Ellison writes based on an extensive study done with numerous congregations, specifically addressing issues of how local churches can engage moral issues in the surrounding culture. He correctly insists that all Christians are called to be theologians and that individual disciples are best formed when the church gathers to study and apply Scripture, both individually and together, with the intent of moral and spiritual development. The single best way for a community to become more intentional about the process of discipleship is to begin with disciples studying Scripture together for the purpose of contemporary application. Out of that study can come fruitful reflections and intentional commitments to grow as disciples together.

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The exercise of formulating a covenant document is also necessary for discipleship because followers of Jesus need an intentional and structured process for spiritual growth. In the famed “Reveal Study” begun in 2004 by Willow Creek Community Church, researchers identified churches that were successful at facilitating the movement of people into closer relationships with Jesus. In examining the most successful churches, they concluded, “These churches clearly communicate a pathway of next steps that launches newcomers on a spiritual journey….The pathway’s framework varies and is often customized to reflect individual church circumstances, but there is always a pathway. And the expectation that all congregants will experience and follow this pathway is unmistakable and unavoidable.”19 Their conclusion was that Christians often stagnate in their spiritual growth, regardless of what stage of maturity they currently possess, if they do not have clear plans and commitments in place for continued maturing.20 A covenant of discipleship document can function as a clear commitment and plan for spiritual growth.

The act of creating a covenant of discipleship for all members of a congregation is also a means through which a community can draw closer together. By a church agreeing to a common commitment, discipleship becomes more communal, which is essential because community is itself a necessary component of discipleship. Boa accurately says, “Discipleship is more than a cognitive dump; teaching and training are important components, but they should be imparted in a context of personal association and


20. In discussing people stalled in their faith Hawkins and Parkinson write, “Most recognize the connection between their life circumstances and their lack of spiritual traction. They just have no idea what to do.” Move, 181.
community,… there is no substitute for the relational dimension of inviting people to be with us in a variety of settings so that nurturing becomes incarnational and multidimensional.”  

Thus there is no single program, process, or study series that can create fully formed disciples apart from relationship to the Christian community. An intentional and well-articulated covenant document is a helpful lens to facilitate change in people because the act of creating such a document in and of itself is a communal activity capable of focusing a people on profitable means of spiritual growth.

By examining the overarching narrative of Hebrews, which depicts the hearers of the homily as a people following Jesus through the wilderness and then finding their rest outside the camp, disciples at GCC, through the construction of a covenant of discipleship, seek to join their own narrative to that of the original audience. This narratival joining functions as a means of drawing the community closer together and reorienting them towards God’s ultimate purposes of reconciliation. Anderson and Foley comment on the pastoral power of such a communal endeavor by writing “the primary aim of pastoral care is to assist people in weaving the stories of their lives and God’s stories as mediated through the community into a transformative narrative that will confirm their sense of belonging, strengthen them to live responsibly as disciples in the world, and liberate them from confinement.” Whenever a community can join together to articulate practices and beliefs, such as in a covenant of discipleship, it invariably assists in the discipleship process itself.


Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship and Systems Theory

One theoretical model that supports the use of making this small change (the
development of a covenant of discipleship document) to facilitate a change in the entire
congregation is systems theory. Systems theory accurately posits that systems function
based on sets of rules, usually unarticulated, and that the various pieces of the system
each behave in predictable manners based on the overall desire of systems to self-
maintain. To change a system, such as a congregation or family, the most effective
means of facilitating change is not to focus upon the symptom bearer, but instead to
implement a change, even a small change, in the system. In this project, instead of
seeking to directly change the attitudes of those symptom-bearing members of the GCC
system who exhibit a resistance to the current methods of discipleship, such as
contributing to Bible classes and getting involved in ministries, I will develop a covenant
of discipleship with a small group of involved members as a way of facilitating a change
of culture in how GCC articulates discipleship principles. In many ways, this is the same
move that the author of Hebrews made in which he sought to help a community grow
spiritually, not by addressing the weakest members of the community, but by articulating
a vision of following Jesus and encouraging the community as a whole to create a culture
based upon that vision.

Conclusion

While chapter 1 explored the context of GCC, this chapter focused on the
theological and theoretical constructs that undergirded this project. By exploring six
discipleship themes in Hebrews (listening to God’s voice, the danger of falling away, the

rewards of faith, the better covenant, endurance through suffering, and the formation of virtue), GCC will have the tools to develop a covenant of discipleship. Developing this covenant document was the ultimate goal of this project, and chapter 3 will describe the methodology I employed to take these six theological themes and construct a covenant of discipleship to aid the members of GCC in the discipleship process.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In significant ways the members of the Gwinnett Church of Christ are like the people who first received the letter to the Hebrews; they eagerly desire to follow in the path of Jesus, but need additional inspirations and a word of exhortation to do so more fully. As the excitement of walking in the ways of Jesus turned into an exercise in persistence, both the Hebrews context and GCC needed a word of encouragement. The project intervention detailed in this chapter seeks to mirror the work of the book of Hebrews and provide a document specifically designed to facilitate the discipleship process among a group of believers who possess a desire to follow Jesus but need a word of inspiration.

In chapter 1 I described some of the specifics of the ministry context of GCC and demonstrated a need for a more intentional process of discipleship for the membership. Chapter 2 examined the exhortation sections of Hebrews as a theological lens through which GCC communally discerned discipleship principles and established the validity of a covenant of discipleship for GCC members. In this chapter I detail the methodology employed for this project and describe the project sessions themselves that resulted in a covenant of discipleship for the membership of GCC.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research, functions as a useful approach for studying natural social life in which the data collected and analyzed come in
the form of interviews, field notes, or other artifacts that defy numerical measurements.¹

The intervention described below utilized a qualitative methodology that sought to
address the problem formulated in chapter 1 and also used an intervention that I assessed
using qualitative means: field notes, expert evaluation, and narrative questionnaire.
Qualitative research works best for this particular intervention because the process of
discipleship results in spiritual growth that researchers cannot measure quantitatively, and
the process of formulating a covenant of discipleship is in itself somewhat subjective, as
participants seek to communally discern what content will best facilitate the healthy
formation of disciples of Jesus.

**Participatory Action Research**

Not only did this intervention rely upon qualitative methods; it also utilized a
representative group to join together in a specific kind of research known as participatory
action research. Ozanne and Saatcioglu state that the defining characteristic of this type
of research is that it “involves consumers throughout the research process across problem
identification, design, data collection, analysis and application of the research findings.”²
While this project engaged church members, not “consumers,” the principle of group
participation shares the same goals: empowering the group members in a manner that
increases buy-in and helping participants develop new skills that will ultimately result in
a tangible change in the designated context. By utilizing church members of GCC, who
are both the subject of the research and the recipients of the final covenant of discipleship

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¹ For a fuller understanding of qualitative research as an academic means of research design and
data analysis, see Johnny Saldana, *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research* (New York: Oxford University
Press, 2011), specifically pp. 3-4, for a complete, in-depth definition of qualitative research.

424. While this article focuses primarily on using participatory action research (PAR) in for-profit
corporations seeking to change consumer habits, it does provide a good overview of the uses of PAR as a
research methodology.
document, in the intervention, this project seeks change not only through the future use of the covenant of discipleship, but by the formulation of the covenant document itself.

Participatory action research acknowledges that the very act of designing and conducting research with a group of people is itself an intervention.\(^3\) Doing such research, even simply asking people questions, changes the subject group. For this particular project, researching discipleship principles functioned as a positive intervention that facilitated participants in their desire to become better disciples. By specifically including key informants to serve as participants in this project, the intervention directly impacted the lives of leaders in numerous demographics at GCC and therefore positively impacted numerous members throughout the congregation, even though they did not participate in the project directly. My peculiar role in this project was that of both researcher and participant in the group.\(^4\) This position was unavoidable, but it also presented me with a unique opportunity to serve as a facilitator for helping GCC as a whole move toward a more intentional place of discipleship.

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3. For a more thorough discussion of how participatory action research functions as an intervention in and of itself and for a comprehensive analysis of how theologically driven research differs from market research, see Elaine Graham, “Is Practical Theology a Form of ‘Action Research’?” *IJPT* 17(2013): 148-78. In her conclusion she argues, “Like action research, theological action research has a number of objectives: firstly, to understanding a situation; secondly, to praxis-driven change; but thirdly, and critically, to the formation of character and agency, nurtured by the well-spring of its core values. In identifying with the goals and values of action research, practical theologians are sharing a conviction that research is never ‘pure’ or dispassionate, but oriented towards the achievement of practical out-comes. In that respect, it necessarily holds the activities of action and reflection in synthesis, since the outcomes of investigation are not simply the transformation of the ‘outer’ world of situations, institutions and communities but is ultimately rooted in the cultivation of the ‘inner’ self in the habits of practical wisdom” Graham, 178.

Overview of the Project Intervention

The intervention began with two prequel sessions in December of 2015, which covered background material to the theology of Hebrews and discussed the sociological parallels between the modern GCC context and the context of the Hebrew’s community. The project itself consisted of a series of eight sessions in January and February of 2016. The first six sessions examined six distinct theological themes found in the exhortation sections of Hebrews, and during the last two sessions the group worked on formulating the covenant of discipleship document itself. This final, one-page document\(^5\) articulated practices, attitudes, and beliefs the group committed to fostering among the members of the Gwinnett Church of Christ for the formation of disciples.

Description of the Participants

To gather the necessary covenant of discipleship creation team, I selected thirteen key informants\(^6\) in conjunction with the recommendations of the GCC leadership team. I intentionally selected thirteen church members to serve as project participants who represent the racial, theological, gender, and age diversity present at GCC. The youth and family minister also recommended one teenager who participated in the project and represented the youth group demographic. One of the shepherds of the congregation who was present during the formation of the covenant of discipleship crafted for the leadership team also served as a participant in the project. I intentionally selected key informants who have displayed a level of understanding of the dynamics of GCC and have demonstrated a life of discipleship.

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5. See appendix G.

6. Key informants are “those people holding the most knowledge about the DOI (domain of inquiry) or major focus of the study”. (Marilyn R. McFarland et al., “Ethnonursing: A Qualitative Research Method for Studying Culturally Competent Care across Disciplines,” *IJQM* 11 (2012): 264. Key informants are contrasted to general informants who may possess some knowledge, but would not be considered among those most initiated into the domain of inquiry. For this project thesis, the key informants are selected from among GCC members as people who have displayed a level of understanding of the dynamics of GCC and have demonstrated a life of discipleship.\[^{5}\]
informants who provided me with a purposive sample of the congregation.\textsuperscript{7}

Prior to the first session, all participants in this project signed a consent form\textsuperscript{8} that explained the potential risks, benefits, and purpose of the project. The consent form also noted that each participant had the option to withdraw from the project at any time and for any reason. One participant, unfortunately, did withdraw after the sixth session due to personal medical complications and was unable to complete the project with the group. The consent form explained that all data and quotations gained from the research project would remain anonymous and all field notes, questionnaires, and any other data would remain secured in my office behind two locked doors.

Description of the Project Sessions

Overview: Sessions occurred on Sunday mornings during the regular Bible class time, 9:30 a.m.–10:15 a.m., during the winter quarter 2015-2016. This schedule allowed childcare to take place through the children’s Bible classes. This was also a time when the participants were accustomed to participating in studies and discussions pertaining to the life of the church. The sessions took place in the medium-sized adult classroom commonly utilized for adult Bible classes. Sessions were forty five minutes in length, but after gathering, opening words, and prayers, sessions became approximately thirty five minutes in length. GCC operates on a quarter system for adult Bible classes, and the winter quarter ran from December 2015 through February 2016, but due to the holiday schedule, the group did not meet the last two Sundays in December. The first two

\textsuperscript{7} For a good overview of sampling issues and definitions for purposive sampling, see GMA Higginbottom, “Sampling Issues in Qualitative Research,” \textit{NR} 12 (2004): 7-19. When discussing purposive sampling, Higginbottom says it is sampling in which the researcher uses his or her judgment to select participants in a study. Higginbottom writes, “a judgment or selection is made in relation to the participant’s membership of the group or subculture under investigation” (11).

\textsuperscript{8} See appendix F.
Sundays in December covered introductory material, and the first field-noted session began the first Sunday of January. While there are nine Sundays in January through February, I was absent one week for a doctor of ministry class; therefore, the group met only eight times. The first six sessions examined specific exhortations in Hebrews, and the final two sessions served as a construction time for the covenant of discipleship document itself.

Prequel Session 1: The first prequel session discussed the objectives of the project, specifically, the formulation of a covenant of discipleship based on the exhortations of the book of Hebrews. This session then described the function of such a covenant document in facilitating spiritual growth, and the group examined the previous covenant of discipleship,9 crafted in 2011 for the GCC leadership team. This initial time together ended in group prayer, specifically asking for God’s guidance and direction throughout this project.

Prequel Session 2: The second prequel session quickly reviewed the objectives of the group, then focused on studying background information helpful to understanding the theology of the book of Hebrews. I led the group through a study of the community that first received the homily, specifically, their place as a second-generation community questioning fidelity to Jesus. We examined questions such as how the Hebrew context mirrors our own? We talked about the rhetorical strategy of *synkrisis* and the use of Judaism as a comparison, not a temptation. I led the group through a study of the overarching narratives of journeying to the promised land, the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, and also through the genre of the book as a homily. This groundwork enabled us to look at specific passages with greater intensity and understanding during the actual project.

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9. See appendix C.
sessions. Prequel session 2 ended in group prayer, specifically asking for God’s guidance and direction throughout this covenant construction project.

**Session 1 “Listening to God’s Voice”**

I opened the session with a prayer and then proceeded to give a short review of the main points of the prequel sessions. Specifically, I highlighted the main theology of Hebrews, which is not to return to Judaism, but is instead an exhortation to strengthen the community’s faith in God. I also reviewed the concept of churches going through a life-cycle in which the second generation faces the temptation of leaving the days of excitement and dreaming and entering into a period of maintenance followed by a gradual decline in commitment. This critical time in a congregation’s life appears in the Hebrews’ community and also at GCC. Several participants acknowledged the seriousness of a congregation’s regaining that initial excitement. One young woman said, “This gradual slide can quickly get out of hand. My parents’ church is going through a split right now because some people want to dream again and others don’t.” The group agreed that while GCC is still feeling the excitement of being in a community together, we want to guard against losing momentum and commitment to Jesus.

I then spent a few minutes teaching about the opening *synkrisis* of Hebrews 1:1-4, which compares the word spoken through the prophets to the word spoken through Jesus. One participant stated, “In the past people received a word through the prophets. But Jesus is the Word. Not only is he a greater prophet, but he’s also the greater message.” We proceeded to discuss how this idea of listening to the word moves directly into chapter 2, in which we encounter the first major exhortation to listen. At this point I asked, “What are we supposed to pay attention to?” The group spent a few minutes
discussing the content to which we are to pay careful attention, and the conversation turned into a fruitful discussion on the heart of the gospel. Everyone agreed that the ultimate truth to which we should turn our attention is the truth of Jesus and the life of discipleship.

The bulk of the session then consisted of a discussion of the imagery in Hebrews 3 and 4, in which the author of Hebrews uses the example of the Israelites in the wilderness who failed to reach the promised land because they failed to listen to the word spoken through Moses. I invited the participants to reflect on this section and bring up what they felt were the most salient points. One participant noted the seriousness of this warning, specifically stating that the consequences of failing to listen resulted in the deaths of all the Israelites except for the two who did listen. Another participant mentioned that Hebrews chose this particular illustration because in it there is no middle ground; either you listen to the Lord and find life, or you fail to listen and find death. The one elder present noted that the difficulty in listening to God’s voice is that it promises something not yet seen. The Israelites (and often Christians today) fail to listen to God’s voice because we choose the certainty of what we can see. It is easier to follow Pharaoh or Caesar because they are visible.

Session 1’s discussion ended with an examination of Hebrews 4:12-13, in which I asked the group to reflect on the question, “How does the imagery of the word of God as a sword relate to how we listen to God?” The group agreed that listening to God goes beyond merely hearing the words and instead demands faith and obedience. It is an active listening. One participant tied this discussion neatly back into the earlier conversations by saying, “We start off dreaming, and then we fall into maintenance mode by listening to
the conventional wisdom of men.” Several participants noted the connection between the Israelites in the wilderness, the community to which Hebrews wrote, and our own modern context.

I closed the session with two homework questions. How does God speak to us today and how does that go beyond just Scripture? What does it mean to make the word of God foundational for your life as a disciple of Jesus? I instructed the group to reflect on those questions over the following days, and I reminded them that I would begin a Google document that would start the process of constructing our covenant of discipleship. I intimated that the first item on the document would be something that expressed our commitment to listen to God’s voice. We ended in prayer.

Session 2 “The Danger of Falling Away”

I opened the session with a prayer and then proceeded to give a short review of the previous lessons, which focused on how the discipleship process begins with listening to the word of God mediated through Jesus and on the importance of a congregation’s not becoming stagnant. I also reminded everyone of the Google document, which all participants could edit and which contained our working covenant of discipleship.

After the review the group reflected on the discussion question, “What are the consequences of falling away from the Christian community?” The following discussion was quite lively as the group mentioned the loss of hope, peace, and support that follows a separation from the community. One lady recounted her own story of falling away from church as a young adult and said, “I found myself doing things I never thought I would do.” The ensuing discussion contained a great deal of emotion.
We then proceeded to read the opening verses of Hebrews 2 and connected the idea of refusing to listen to God’s word with the ultimate loss of salvation. Specifically, we noted how the admonition to the community is that they not “drift away.” We talked about how the danger is not that a Christian wakes up one day and decides to worship a different god or renounces a belief in Jesus; the danger is that over time we slowly lose our focus on Jesus. One man noted, “It’s a gradual process. We start by taking things for granted, and then one day you find yourself where you never intended to be.” Another group member noted specifically how at GCC it can be easy to say, “Oh, someone else will cover for that [ministry] if I’m not there,” and then it is easy to choose sleeping in on Sundays instead of coming to church. The gradual slide can result in a complete loss of commitment to the community.

I then asked the group to consider the imagery of Hebrews 3 and 4, in which the Israelites died in the desert for their lack of faith. I specifically asked how this connected to the danger of drifting away. One man said, “Ultimately what they did was they believed in what they saw over what God said … they saw giants, they saw walls, they saw all of the obstacles rather than believe what God said.” In moving this to GCC’s context, the group then talked about how it is easier to see our busy schedules and activities than it is to see the promises of God. It is easier to focus on work obligations, sports teams, catching up on sleep, than it is to focus on the promised land that we cannot see.

I then moved the group to an examination of Hebrews 5:11-6:12. This text admonishes the community to grow in maturity in their faith and not become lazy. In discussing this text the one teenager in our group commented on the importance of
transitioning from childhood to adulthood in both physical life and the life of faith. One father of young children talked about how his boys currently eat simple foods and hear simple Bible stories, but he wants them to grow in their ability both to handle more complex meals and to grapple with more complex theologies. This conversation flowed into a discussion of how spiritual growth requires work. The problem with this, however, is that many of us have such a strong, visceral reaction to “works righteousness” and such a high view of grace that the idea of us needing to put forth intentional efforts into our own process of discipleship sounds jarring. One lady in our group who works as a marriage and family therapist made the good point that just as a marriage relationship requires work to grow, so too does our relationship with God.

In the final minutes of the session, I introduced Hebrews 10:19-39 and asked, “How can we as disciples strengthen one another to not fall away?” The group at this point talked of the importance of encouraging one another and how they personally feel encouraged by coming together at GCC; they noted that encouragement is a strength of the congregation. One young mother spoke of the importance of having older women who encouraged her in child-raising, and another member talked about how we desperately need the community, especially when we face difficult seasons of life. I instructed the group to continue thinking about this question as we move forward with our covenant of discipleship creation process, specifically as we will revisit this concept of prioritizing the community. The session ended with a reading from Hebrews 12:25-29 and a prayer asking God to strengthen our faith and bless our covenant of discipleship creation process.
Session 3 “The Rewards of Faith”

I began the session with a prayer and a quick review of the first two sessions. Specifically, I talked about how we are committed to maintaining a listening posture and to guarding ourselves against falling away. We also reviewed the Google document that is our working copy of the covenant of discipleship.

The meat of the session began with a reading of Hebrews 4, after which I asked, “What is the promise? What is the reward offered to Hebrew’s audience?” After discussing the “rest” offered by God, one participant said, “There are three kinds of rest. There’s the rest of the promised land, there is the rest we get from our own earthly struggles, and there is the eternal rest we get after this life.” The group proceeded to discuss the now/not yet promised rest that disciples enjoy because of the work of Jesus. This led directly into the follow-up question, “How does having hope for a future rest and the present reality of rest change the way we live?” In the following discussion, two main themes emerged: disciples live with confidence, and disciples live with a different perspective on the world from those outside the faith. In discussing the different perspective, one participant said, “When we talk about the peace that passes understanding, it’s not that our peace can’t be comprehended, it’s that our peace allows us to endure the trials that we can’t understand.” The dialog largely centered on the idea that most of the struggles and worries people endure currently are not worthy of worry or stress because believers possess an eternal kingdom perspective. The group also acknowledged that this is easier said than done, but still is a worthy pursuit for disciples.

The conversation regarding confidence led directly into reading the next two passages of the session: Hebrews 10:19-25 and 12:18-29. Both of these passages tie into
the end of chapter 4 and exhort to assure listeners that by persevering as a part of the Christian community they are able to be directly in the presence of God and the heavenly host. At this point I asked, “What implications exist from being able to come directly before God?” Again the group discussed the importance of living with confidence and also the importance of living in a Christian community. One young lady commented specifically regarding the chapter 10 passage, “We need a community to maintain our full assurance of faith. This is not an individual thing.” One older man commented regarding the chapter 12 passage, “It’s a dichotomy. You will stand before God, and you can either be made fully aware of your sin, or you can be made fully aware of your faith. There is no gray area.” Both of these comments tied into the importance of being in God’s presence as part of the life of discipleship.

Toward the end of the session, I invited the group to imagine what it would have been like to have lived in the Roman Empire at the time of Hebrews. This was a time when churches were small house-churches meeting in the same cities in which large pagan temples and colosseums marked the height of Greco-Roman culture. This was an environment in which Christians would have been at a decided disadvantage in trying to fit in with the population at large. Everybody knew that the Roman Empire was the most important entity in the world, yet the Christians were able to continue in the faith because they knew they worshiped alongside thousands of angels and were able to stand before God Almighty.

After the imaginative exercise, the group discussed how the kingdom of God matters more than the other things with which we get distracted and how no matter what happens to the kingdoms of this world or the elections upcoming in America, the
kingdom of God will endure. One participant summarized this portion of the session nicely when he said, “We have the ultimate assurance through Jesus Christ.”

I closed the session with an admonition to continue working on our Google document and a prayer for God’s continued blessing on the participants and upon the work of creating a covenant of discipleship.

**Session 4 “The Better Covenant”**

The session began with a prayer, a quick review of the objective of creating a covenant of discipleship document, and a brief reminder of the content covered in the previous sessions. I then proceeded to remind the participants of the rhetorical use of *synkrisis* by the author of Hebrews, by which the preacher exhorts his audience to consider the superiority of Jesus to anything else available. *Synkrisis* first appears in the opening thought of the book in the comparison between the word spoken through the prophets and the word spoken through the Son, but finds its climax in the tabernacle imagery of chapters 6-10.

The bulk of session 4 consisted of a reading of Hebrews 6:13 -10:18, which compares the sacrificial system of Judaism with the new covenant of Jesus, while we asked the question, “Who/What is Jesus?” As we read through the text, one of the participants wrote the groups’ answers on the whiteboard. The first comparison came as we read the end of chapter 6 and discussed how Jesus is the high priest. In this discussion we highlighted how Jesus is not so much a new thing as the fulfilment of the original covenant God made with Abraham.

As we proceeded into reading chapter 7, one participant commented on how Jesus is our much-needed better hope because “It is impossible to follow the law. If it was up to
us following the law, then we all fall short, and we all die.” The group proceeded to discuss how important Jesus is not only as our hope, but as our guarantor, our intercessor, and our perfect sacrifice. In concluding chapter 7 and entering chapters 8 and 9, the group examined how Jesus serves at the more perfect, heavenly tabernacle. We talked about how Jesus is the author of a new covenant for us, made through the shedding of his blood, and how ultimately Jesus serves as our savior.

I then talked about how all the sacrificial imagery and comparisons between Jesus and the Jewish tabernacle system set up the second half of chapter 10, in which Hebrews exhorts the hearers to commit more strongly to the Christian community. Specifically, I spoke about how an understanding of Jesus serving at the true tabernacle should allow disciples to understand that we are a part of something bigger, more important, and more permanent than any pagan temple, leisure activity, or worldly pursuit in which we might be tempted to take part.

The latter half of the session then focused on answering the following discussion question: “What does it mean that we are part of a better covenant, and how does this new covenant change the way we understand our role as disciples? How does this change our worship? How does this change our daily life? How does this change our worldview?” One young lady said, “It should make us so aware of grace that we choose to extend it to others. It should also lead to a reverence where we fall to our knees.” One older man commented, “It’s like the parable of the ten virgins; time is important to God. To me that means that we need to make sure we are giving our best to God. It’s a problem if we don’t make it to services.” Following that comment, the group talked about the importance of regular church attendance, which led one participant to say, “We call
that the ‘don’t skip church’ verse (10:25), but keep reading…why? Because of the community. The purpose of this is that we might encourage each other. God expects a lot more from us than church attendance. It’s up to us to build each other up. We can’t live the life God wants for us if we are not in the assembly.”

Ultimately, the group concluded that a knowledge of the superiority of Jesus should change the way we as disciples view ourselves and the world by making Jesus our first, overriding priority. One participant summarized nicely when he said, “It’s the old promised land versus the new promised land. We are given everything by God. Jesus has already conquered everything, so just do it [live a life of discipleship].” As disciples we are a part of something of ultimate, even if largely unseen, importance. This new covenant changes the hearts of disciples and results in more godly living.

I ended the session with an encouragement to think about how we might take the content of the session and use it to formulate content for our covenant of discipleship document. We closed with a prayer that we might exhibit the attitudes and heart that recognize the importance and superiority of Jesus.

**Session 5 “The Way of Suffering”**

I began the session with a prayer, a brief review of the project so far, and an admonition to continue working on our covenant of discipleship document. After these opening remarks, I asked a discussion question, “When was a time in your life in which you feel that you really grew closer to God?” Initially the group met this question with an awkward silence, which lasted until one participant told of how he almost lost his son. This was followed by another participant recounting how she grew closer to God immediately following joining the church at Gwinnett. The group proceeded to get a little
emotional as various participants related different personal stories of how they grew closer to God, either through connecting strongly with a church family for the first time or through enduring a season of pain. I remarked that while I had anticipated that the participants would talk about times of suffering in which they grew closer to God, the numerous stories of growing closer through committing more deeply to the Christian community surprised me.

I used this conversation to transition to a reading of Hebrews 5:7-10 and a follow-up discussion on how suffering can teach disciples obedience as Jesus learned obedience. One participant tied the concept of suffering to submission. Another said, “Suffering puts us in a place of choice. It is easy to obey when things are good. When things are bad, we have to choose obedience. And if Jesus, even though he was the son, could only learn obedience through suffering, who am I that I think I can get through it without suffering?” This led to yet another participant who lamented the health and wealth teaching found in many evangelical churches. He said, “What happens when things don’t work out the way you want them to? That’s the time that I grew. I did the right things, but it didn’t work out very well.” The group as a whole continued to discuss the impracticality of abandoning faith in seasons of suffering and remembered situations in which their own suffering had led to spiritual growth.

I then led the group through an overview of Hebrews 11, the “Faith Hall of Fame,” and asked, “What is the main point of this variety of examples?” In words dripping with sarcasm one group member joked, “Faith is so glamorous.” The group laughed but agreed, if the author of Hebrews is attempting to bolster the faith of people considering lessening their commitments to Jesus, then why would he spend so much
time describing the sufferings of those who maintained faith? We then read Hebrews 12:1-11, which re-visions suffering both as a means of following Jesus and as a way of receiving discipline from a loving God. At this point I asked, “How can we view our suffering as discipline, and is all suffering discipline?” The group strongly asserted that there is a difference between punishment and discipline. One participant captured this idea perfectly when she related to the group her experience with her medically challenged son, Luke. She said, “We automatically think of discipline as consequences for things we’ve done wrong. I don’t think that Luke’s illness was to discipline us or to correct us. But Luke’s illness taught us how to pray, taught our church how to pray. It was teaching us those truths: that’s discipline. In that way, yes, it was to discipline us.” The group agreed that God uses suffering as a means of shaping disciples more into the image of Jesus, and that we should view our suffering as something that God can use to bring about good.

I closed the session with a reading of Hebrews 13:11-13, in which the author encourages his readers to go to Jesus outside the camp. Ultimately, discipleship is about following Jesus. The final comment made by the participants that day came when one said, “All of these awesome people [from chapter 11], they are still waiting on us to get their glory. They are not only waiting on us to join them but to finally be fulfilled. It’s all about following Jesus to the prize.” I closed in prayer.

*Session 6 “Virtue”*

I opened the session with a prayer and reminded the group of the ongoing task of creating a covenant of discipleship document. I then reminded the group of the basic theology of the book so far, including the superiority of Jesus, the once-for-all sacrifice,
the ongoing journey to the promised land, and the danger of falling away. We then noted how the final two chapters of Hebrews consists largely of ethical exhortations. I requested that the group keep all of this in mind as I asked the discussion question, “What relationship does loving the Christian community have to loving Jesus?” Everyone agreed that both loves were contingent upon the other. One participant said, “The primary relationship is that we are created in his image. If we believe that, then we have to understand that so is everyone else, and we have to treat them accordingly.” Another participant brought up the idea that the church is the bride of Christ, and that it is impossible to love either Jesus or the bride without loving them both. The group at this point got off onto something of a tangent by discussing the ways in which a great many people in modern American culture often claim to love Jesus but dislike the church.

I brought the group back to the discussion of virtue by having them read Hebrews 12:14-17 and asking the question, “As the author of Hebrews wraps up his sermon, what virtues does he list for us to follow?” Responses included peaceful, holy, set apart, sexually pure, positive not bitter, and not irreverent. One participant noticed how this particular passage utilizes Esau as a negative example and connected the story of Esau with the overall theology of Hebrews, which serves as a warning against giving up a far greater promise for the sake of a momentary pleasure. The group agreed that we must be intentional in the cultivation of virtue so that we are not prone to compulsive acts like Esau’s, which caused him to miss out on tremendous blessings.

At this point the group read Hebrews 13 and discussed the following questions: Which of the virtues listed at the end of Hebrews seem most difficult for disciples today? How can we promote these virtues in our own lives? What other virtues promoted
throughout Christian history would you add to this list if creating it for a modern community? One participant mentioned the importance of sharing possessions, one the importance of remembering people in prison, and another spoke of the dangers of covetousness. One student in the group brought up the idea that the opening exhortation in 13:1 to love each other as brothers and sisters governs the whole passage. He said, “Even with your siblings, you may not like them, but you love them because they are your family. I am duty bound to love them.” The virtue of love guides all the other virtues.

In answering the portion of the question that sought to apply these principles of virtue to modern communities, one participant posited that covetousness and greed would receive greater attention from the writer of Hebrews today than his original audience merited. He said, “This is harder today because you can get stuff without having money to get it. It’s possible to get more stuff than you should have in our society in an easier way than in ages past.” The group agreed with this assessment, but for the most part felt that people are people and that the need to cultivate virtue has not changed much in the intervening years between the original sermon and today.

I directed the session towards closing by highlighting that, at the end of the Hebrews’ sermon, the preacher exhorts us to follow Jesus “outside the camp.” This ties in the cultivation of virtue with the overall design of discipleship, which is to follow in the way of Jesus. I then closed with a discussion of how the next two sessions would be spent formulating the covenant of discipleship document. We closed in prayer.
Session 7 “Document Construction Part 1”

After a prayer I began the session by handing out printed copies of the work the group had done already on the covenant of discipleship document on Google and a copy of the covenant of discipleship created by Drew Gaylor for the leadership team in the previous project. I explained that we should draw from the theology of Hebrews to construct our document, but that we should also include our own experiences of spiritual growth and look to both the leadership covenant of discipleship and the rest of the Bible for other necessary discipleship principles. One participant volunteered to write our ideas on the board, and I then opened the process to group discussion.

At this point a vigorous discussion took place as to the specific context of our covenant of discipleship. Are we creating a new covenant that exists between us and God? Are we entering into a new covenant with each other? How is our new covenant actually going to be implemented or utilized at GCC? One of the participants brought up the problems that occurred in many churches when the Boston Movement went through Churches of Christ, and talked about why that period of history makes him skeptical of covenant language. I assured the group that our covenant of discipleship was intended to function as a lens through which we view the process of discipleship and was not going to be a dogmatic accountability tool used to pressure people. This discussion took the majority of the session time and left very little time for actual covenant construction.

After this the group did decide that we wanted the purpose statement, or preamble, to include four points: the idea of continually redreaming (as opposed to living out a natural life-cycle of church growth and decline), the concept that we are called to love God and the local community, the necessary understanding that spiritual growth is a
work of the Spirit, and the limitation that the ideas expressed in our covenant of discipleship were not exhaustive, but merely represent some of the ways we seek to grow as disciples.

At this point we had run out of time, so we decided that I would write an initial draft of the ideas for the preamble we had discussed on our Google document and that through the week people in the group would add their ideas and edit the first draft of our covenant of discipleship. We closed the session with a prayer for the project’s success and for God’s blessing upon our work.

Session 8 “Document Construction Part 2”

Session 8 began with prayer, and then the group proceeded to look at the first full draft of the covenant of discipleship document. Approximately the first half of the session focused on the wording of the preamble to ensure that the document adequately captured the idea of looking to the future and resisting complacency. The group disagreed with each other strongly on the best way to capture these ideas, and one participant brought up the critique that the initial, and quite lofty, wording missed our primary audience. She asserted that if the document was to be used by the membership in general, then our overall wording needed to sound less academic and utilize a more vernacular vocabulary. The group agreed, and over the next several minutes we simplified the wording of the preamble both to capture the idea of vision and to keep the wording more appropriate for our congregational context.

Once we got through the preamble and examined the individual bullet points themselves, the process sped up considerably. The group quickly endorsed the draft of the next acknowledgment points until we reached the section on the formation of virtue.
Here the group spent several minutes discussing which virtues should be included in our covenant document and which could be combined or omitted for the sake of space and simplicity.

The final point of disagreement came with the group’s insistence that we include a point about evangelism. Some did not like the word “evangelism,” and a couple of participants noted that we should word the point in a positive way that resisted a condescending tone. Finally, we settled on the phrase “sharing the good news.”

After a brief re-ordering of the points, the group expressed their satisfaction with the document. I promised the group that we could make final edits over the next few days, but that otherwise the document itself was completed. I ended the session with a reminder of the necessity for them to answer the narrative questionnaire, and we closed with a final prayer for the success of our project, and more importantly, the success of GCC in taking part in God’s kingdom.

**Evaluation Methodology**

Throughout the process of this intervention, I collected data that I later triangulated as a way of evaluating the covenant of discipleship. Triangulation is especially appropriate as a means of establishing credibility for a qualitative research project because it involves collecting data from multiple sources. This is designed “to deepen understanding by collecting a variety of data on the same topic or problem with the aim of combining multiple views or perspectives and producing a stronger account rather than simply achieving consensus or corroboration.”¹⁰ This project utilized an

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insider evaluation, an outsider evaluation, and a researcher evaluation as the three angles of triangulation.

Insider evaluation: At the conclusion of the final session I passed out a sheet of paper with the covenant of discipleship document as the group had constructed it to that point, and on the back of the sheet was the following discussion question: If you would please dream about the future of GCC and envision that we fully implement this covenant of discipleship asking that all members seek to live out these principles, what 3-4 things (something more concrete) do you envision will be different about how we live and work in the kingdom of God? Or conceived differently, how will this document better facilitate GCC in fulfilling our mission statement of being a Loving Family, Living for God, and Serving our Neighbors?

I informed the group that I would e-mail everyone the final draft of the covenant of discipleship after we had finished word-smithing in the final session and after we had had a chance to consider any final edits to the Google document. A few days after the final session, I sent an e-mail to the group that contained the final draft of the covenant of discipleship as well as another copy of the discussion question necessary for the insider evaluation. Over the course of the next two weeks, I received ten narrative responses; unfortunately, three members of the group decided not to participate in the evaluation portion of the project, one because she dropped out of the project after the sixth session and two others for personal reasons. The responses I did receive formed a data set of approximately twelve pages in length that reflected principles gleaned both from the exhortation sections of Hebrews and the personal experiences and understandings of the participants about the process of discipleship.
Outsider evaluation: Drew Gaylor, the author of the original covenant of discipleship for the leadership team, functioned as an outside expert who wrote his reflections on the covenant of discipleship.\textsuperscript{11} His reflections included the covenant’s potential effectiveness for GCC to better live out our mission statement: a loving family, living for God, serving our neighbors, and recognized a need for a more formal discipleship process. Gaylor is currently serving as the preaching minister for a congregation in Texas, but prior to that, he served for several years as the senior pulpit minister at GCC, during which time he completed his doctor of ministry degree at Abilene Christian University. This placed him in a unique position of having once been a GCC insider, but who since 2013 possesses an outsider’s perspective and possessed the necessary academic experience to evaluate the covenant of discipleship. Gaylor was happy to lend his assistance and unique expertise to this project.

Researcher evaluation: GCC’s office administrator served as a participant observer\textsuperscript{12} and took detailed field notes in conjunction with me, using a three-column approach.\textsuperscript{13} I selected her to serve in this capacity because of her extensive training and experience in the corporate world regarding note-taking and composing documentation. She also possessed a breadth and depth of knowledge of all the participants as well as the overall workings of GCC. The first column consisted of the specific observations recorded by the office administrator based on chapter 2 of the thesis and based on the

\textsuperscript{11} See appendix H.

\textsuperscript{12} “As a technical term in ethnography, participant observers are immersed into the daily activities of the culture being studied. Living daily with people, learning to speak their language, understanding their rituals and symbols, enables the researcher to minimize her own presence upon people’s responses.” Tim Sensing, \textit{Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses} (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 93.

\textsuperscript{13} See appendix E for a blank field note protocol sheet.
flow of the conversations during the sessions. She specifically observed items directly related to the covenant of discipleship construction process itself. The office administrator filled in the second column with her reflections and additional observations both during the sessions themselves and also any additional insights remembered over the course of the next two days. During the sessions themselves I jotted down observations and reflections on my own notes upon which I elaborated later in the day and on the following day. I then added my own notes, which served as the third column, to the office administrator’s notes each Tuesday when she sent me her documentation.

**Data Analysis**

After conducting my project intervention and obtaining data from a qualitative questionnaire, Gaylor’s evaluation, and my field notes, I had three data sets for analysis. These data enabled me to evaluate my project and project its overall level of success, and they provide direction for implementation and other next steps. There are two primary means by which I analyzed my data: coding methods and triangulation.

The first necessary step in analyzing my data was to develop coding methods. The specific themes from chapter 2 of this thesis provided code categories, including language pertaining to discipleship/following Jesus, language reflecting a need to listen to God’s voice, language regarding the need to stay faithful and not fall away, language focused on the rewards of faith, language regarding the better covenant available through Jesus, language that sees suffering as a form of discipline, and language of the need to develop virtue. Formulating these six codes served as the first analytical step.

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14. Coding is a process for analyzing data sets as a means of evaluating research. McFarland et al. write that after data is collected, “data are coded and classified as they relate to the domain of inquiry and research questions. … Codes specific to a study or discipline may be added or codes not applicable to a study may be deleted.” McFarland et al., “Ethnonursing,” 266. For this project, the codes are derived from the theology of Hebrews as described in chapter 2.
The second step in evaluating my data was through the use of triangulation. The insider, outsider, and researcher angles described above provided distinct data sets that allowed me to evaluate the level of success of the intervention. I put these three in dialogue with one another and with the objective of the project in the following chapter.

After I completed the process of coding and triangulation, I then identified pertinent themes in the data. Sensing states, “Data theme analysis involves a sorting, organizing, and indexing of the material that enables you to locate internally consistent patterns that often fit within existing knowledge.” 15 By examining the three angles above, themes emerged from the data sets that corresponded well to the themes found in the theology of Hebrews located in chapter 2 of this document, but also contained two unplanned themes. These major themes are listening to God’s voice, the danger of falling away, the rewards of faith, the better covenant, endurance through suffering, the practice of virtue, the importance of evangelism, and the need for services as part of discipleship.

Not only is it valuable to identify themes in data, but it is also noteworthy to look for silence. Within my data there existed omissions, unvoiced pieces taken for granted, and things left unsaid for a variety of reasons. An inherent limitation of this project is that it can in no possible way account for every aspect of discipleship, even if I simply delineate the data to those aspects of discipleship discussed by the key informants. While I make note of some of the silences I observed in the next chapter, other silences certainly went unnoticed.

Just as important as determining themes by observing the congruencies in my data is the process of looking for slippage. Sensing writes, “Examples that do not fit help

clarify the limits and meaning of the primary patterns.”16 When analyzing my data below, I intentionally draw out the examples that do not fit into the themes mentioned above.

**Conclusion**

While chapter 1 explored the context and problem of GCC and chapter 2 examined the theological and theoretical frameworks undergirding this project, this present chapter described the intervention itself. This chapter also presented the evaluation methodology used to determine the successes and failures of the project. The following chapter explores the results of my triangulated data.

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16. Ibid., 200.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND RESULTS

After examining the specific problem of a lack of a covenant of discipleship (chapter 1), providing a theological foundation for the construction of such a covenant document using the exhortations of the book of Hebrews (chapter 2), and describing the intervention in detail during which the project participants and I constructed the covenant of discipleship for the membership of the Gwinnett Church of Christ (chapter 3), I explore in this chapter the results of the intervention. This chapter considers my field notes, the narrative question responses provided by the project participants, and the evaluation of an independent expert. By allowing those three pieces to dialogue with one another, I triangulated the data as a means of both evaluating the final covenant of discipleship document itself and providing a basis for judging the success of the intervention.

To present data I have chosen to utilize a metaphor of the story of the exodus. This particular Bible story corresponds well to the themes visible within the data, as the process of Israel’s leaving Egypt and the process of growing as a disciple of Jesus follow similar steps. The liberation story of the exodus is the story of a people on a journey with a clear destination in mind, which is exactly the narrative that disciples of Jesus should be living out today as followers journey towards an eternity with Jesus. Both the exodus story and our story begin in the work of God, and both stories contain an intentional process of following. Also, the author of the book of Hebrews organized his material
around the journey of the Israelites; thus it seems appropriate that the subsequent data follow this example and form around this great foundational narrative of redemption.

The Burning Bush—Listening to God’s Voice

The exodus itself begins when out of the burning bush God calls Moses, and Moses, albeit reluctantly, agrees to follow the will of God and begin the long journey that will ultimately take him to the borders of the promised land. In a similar way, the process of following God for disciples today also begins in the work of God, speaking a creative word intended to provide followers with instruction, encouragement, and assurances. Disciples must continually listen to God’s voice.

The first action item in the covenant of discipleship states “Acknowledging that God is alive and continually working in the world, we commit to look for, listen to, and heed the direction God gives us through encountering Scripture, praying communally and individually, and experiencing life with other disciples in ministry.” In many ways this was the easiest of the action items to add into our covenant because most of the participants in this project come from a Restoration Movement background that historically held the importance of Scripture in an extremely high regard. The group also latched onto the importance of listening to God through prayer and to listening for how God may speak to us through the community of believers. The group positioned this as the first action item because the text of Hebrews begins with an exhortation to listen and because we consider this a crucial first step in following Jesus today. Discipleship is about following Jesus, and the only way following is possible is by embracing a listening posture.
Session 1 of the intervention specifically addressed the theme of listening to God’s voice. The field notes from this session record how one of the participants emphasized that Scripture explicitly characterizes Jesus as the word itself, making his message even more important than the words of the other prophets in Scripture. While other prophets throughout the history of Israel brought a word from the Lord, Jesus was the word and he was the Lord. Another participant reflected upon how the imagery of the word of God as a sword in Hebrews 4:12-13 connotes an active listening that participates fully in the word being spoken. The entirety of the first session examined listening to God, primarily through the word, and the group readily agreed with the central importance of this beginning principle. The group also discussed the importance of listening to God through an active prayer life and in hearing God through the voices of the Christian community. God speaks through our brothers and sisters who worship alongside of us, and God speaks through the church throughout history. In many ways this first session was one of the least interactive, which I attribute partly to the fact that most of the participants entered into this project already convinced of the importance of listening to God and were ready to move on to deeper steps.

The participants, however, did get more lively in their discussion of the importance of listening to God when they answered their questionnaires. One participant envisioned a day in which GCC fully implements this covenant of discipleship and foresees a group of committed believers who can better hear how God wants to utilize them in ministry; this participant grasped that the call of God is a call to action. A different respondent took the same track, and even took it further; she envisioned that the covenant document would help her become an instrument of God’s voice to other
believers. She wrote, “If I can visit my sick friend who is in the hospital and pray with her and share encouragement with her, then I can be God’s hands and feet, ears and voice in that situation, acting as a catalyst for his work in this world.” God calls disciples to a life of action.

Another questionnaire spoke of how studying God’s word would lead GCC to a point in which disciples often speak encouragement into the lives of our fellow disciples, which would in turn lead to our studying the word of God in fellowship together. Another participant wrote of how this fully implemented covenant commitment would draw us into Scripture and lead to more of a personal time of studying the words of God. Several other questionnaires listed either Bible study or a focus on prayer and Scripture as something that they believe would increase as a direct result of implementing the covenant of discipleship at GCC. Overall, out of ten questionnaires, seven specifically refer to the importance of disciple’s listening to God, and the other three discussed principles that presupposed that followers of Jesus would spend time in a posture of listening to God through prayer, Scripture, and the influence of the Christian community.

Both the field notes and narrative questionnaires highlighted the importance of the first action item in the covenant of discipleship, and Gaylor’s evaluation did the same. This outsider evaluation explicitly makes the point that both “covenant keeping and discipleship itself are in response to the gracious summons of Christ.” In other words, the first step of discipleship is listening to God’s voice. He also mentioned that God speaks to disciples both words of grace and words calling for obedience and that a healthy faith requires listening to both voices. Specifically, Gaylor commended the covenant of discipleship for honoring the order of these calls in which disciples’ obedience comes in
response to God’s word of grace through Jesus. God’s grace leads to our obedience; God’s work always precedes our work. To violate this order leads to legalism and self-righteousness, which is yet another way of not listening to the full word of God.

All three data sources support the first discipleship principle of the covenant document: we begin our discipleship journey with a commitment to listening. Moses responded to his burning bush; the community of the Hebrew writer presumably obeyed the preacher’s exhortation to listen; and the GCC covenant of discipleship commits us to actively listening to the word of God.

**The Temptation Back to Slavery—The Danger of Falling Away**

In the exodus story the Israelites complained about the misery they suffered in Egypt and cried out to God for deliverance. When God responded to their cries and sent them a prophet who would lead them to freedom, they gladly left behind their Egyptian overlords and rejoiced in the redemption of God. Yet before they had even left Egypt, they complained about the difficulty of the journey and longed to return to the more familiar and predictable discomforts of slavery under Pharaoh. This scene repeated itself numerous times throughout the journey to the promised land, and even beyond, as the people never could commit themselves fully to following God. The temptation to fall away was always with them and would ultimately be their undoing. Disciples must always resist the pull of the surrounding world to abandon faith in the living God.

The second action item in our covenant of discipleship states “Acknowledging the danger of falling away from faith, we commit to making the church a principal priority in our lives so that we can both give and receive encouragement, instruction, and support from the body of Christ.” The group placed this as the second action item in the covenant
for multiple reasons. In the first place, the exhortation to the community in Hebrews to guard against falling away occurs early and often in the text of Hebrews, and it connects directly with the first exhortation to listen to God’s voice. Our group wanted to reflect the priority of this point and also place our commitment against falling away immediately after the commitment to listen. In the second place, the group regularly commented upon the fact that GCC’s loving family atmosphere in which we receive encouragement, instruction, and support was one of our greatest strengths as a congregation, and this action item acknowledges the need for us to play into this strength as we seek to grow as disciples.

The field notes from session 2, which focused on the exhortations to the Hebrews against falling away, indicate that the group was much more talkative during this session than in the session on listening to God’s voice. Much of this is because several of the participants recounted times in their own lives when they either left the church for a period of time or lessened their involvement in the community and suffered because of it. One participant spoke of his own experience and mentioned that part of what drove him to lessen his commitment to church was boredom. He said, “There is not a lot of room for excitement when there is a routine. Because it [church] is a routine, it gets boring.” This same participant later spoke about the importance of community to the discipleship process, saying that one cannot grow as a disciple apart from a community of like-minded believers because one “can’t get good at something [following Jesus] in a vacuum.” Another reason the group was much more animated during this second session than they were in the first is that they believe that the encouragement they receive from the church family at GCC to become more involved and to strengthen their commitments
to ministries is a strength at GCC. Several participants became animated as they described the encouragement they feel from their brothers and sisters at our congregation to make discipleship a greater priority in their lives.

The narrative questionnaires did not speak often of the danger of falling away, but one in particular noted how the knowledge of this temptation helped him personally with his discipleship needs. He responded, “I keep my problems to myself, especially about personal or family matters. However, given the danger of falling away by ‘going rogue’ in my faith, it’s more important to draw near to the church family and share my burdens with God and the church.” He tied this concept into the GCC mission statement item of being a loving family. This loving family aspect of church is what helped him come back to spiritual growth after several years spent drifting in his faith.

Another participant mentioned in her questionnaire that this covenant of discipleship could function as the means through which the danger of falling away could be averted. She recalled her own experience when she wrote, “As someone who fell away from the body and stayed away for many years, I can attest that even as grateful as I am to have been called back, I think I will mourn the waste of those lost years for the rest of my life….I pray that none of us will have to experience that loss.” One person stated that the covenant document would help her to encourage other members against the temptation to fall away. She said, “I envision that for those of us who already make church a principal priority, we can encourage those members on the periphery to join us by inviting them to join in weekly and special activities at our church building.” She went on to point out that when members put their best efforts into church events, it encourages other people to also invest more heavily in the church. Even if the covenant of
discipleship is never fully implemented by all of the members at GCC, the benefits of it will spread from those who do seek to follow its commitments by providing this encouraging example.

The evaluation from my independent expert, Gaylor, spoke repeatedly of the need for commitment as part of the discipleship process. He spoke repeatedly of the “language of acknowledgment” that rooted each commitment in the covenant of discipleship document itself in the work of God. He specifically mentioned this as an improvement in this covenant of discipleship over the covenant of discipleship created in 2011 for the leadership team at GCC. He wrote, “Acknowledging God’s work with each commitment is the perfect antidote for self-righteousness. Our actions are always a response to God’s grace, and the acknowledgement formula is an effective preventative measure against this danger.” Only through making strong commitments to the body of believers can disciples maintain a focus on following Jesus and resist the ever-present temptation to fall away.

After the exodus event God continually warned the covenant people not to return to Egypt and their former way of life. In a similar way disciples today need a continual warning of the dangers of falling away so that we can keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and the redemption that is available only through him. All three data sources from this project support the inclusion of the second action item in the covenant of discipleship, which warns disciples against the danger of falling away.

The Sinai Theophany—Better Covenant

After the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, they immediately journeyed to Mt. Sinai. It was on this mountain that the Lord met with Moses and delivered the law to the people. This law would form the basis of both their relationship to God and the structure for
Israelite society. Even though this law contained within it rules and punishments, the people celebrated that God loved them enough to share with them an instruction for how to live godly lives. God graciously gives disciples a covenant in which to live.

The third action item in our covenant of discipleship states, “Acknowledging that the new covenant of which we are a part is fully a work of Jesus as both high priest and ultimate sacrifice, we commit to offering our bodies as living sacrifices, putting devotion to Jesus above all else.” The reason the project participants and I included this action item in the covenant document is that the central exhortation in the book of Hebrews is for the people to commit more fully to the kingdom because of the work of Jesus as both high priest and ultimate sacrifice. In great detail the preacher to the Hebrews describes how the work of Jesus is better than anything else on Earth or in Heaven. Our group wanted our covenant of discipleship to acknowledge that everything we do in discipleship finds its source in the work of Jesus; discipleship is a response to what has already been done.

When Gaylor evaluated the covenant of discipleship, he particularly commended the overall language of covenant. He wrote, “Another strength of the covenant is the acknowledgement language of the covenant;…The language of acknowledgement is positive and focuses on God, Christ, and/or spiritual blessings.” Gaylor thought it a positive that all of our commitments in our own covenant of discipleship begin not with GCC but with the ultimate covenant created by Jesus in his death and resurrection. The only reason a covenant of discipleship is possible today is that disciples are first a part of the new covenant created by God through Jesus.

While several of the narrative questionnaires made passing reference to thoughts such as “we should act selflessly like Jesus did,” none of the questionnaires brought up
specific language about living under a new and better covenant with Jesus. Most of the action items in our covenant of discipleship document are extremely practical (we commit to doing X), whereas this particular point is more theological in nature (we commit to believing X). Even though the actual wording of the action item utilizes action language, it still functions more as a belief statement. As I asked the group in the questionnaire to reflect on concrete things that would be different at GCC as a result of implementing the covenant of discipleship, they quite naturally focused on orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, which explains their silence on being part of a better covenant.

The field notes from the sessions indicate that the group repeatedly and throughout the intervention referred to the importance of living under the new covenant of Jesus. The session that most specifically focused on this theme was session 4, which examined most of Hebrews 6-10. During this session the conversation was quite lively as one of the participants wrote on the white board while the group answered the question “Who/what is Jesus?” In many ways this session felt more like a traditional Bible class than the other sessions as we read Scripture together and repeatedly asked “What does this mean for us today?” Most of the answers to this question both in session 4 and in other sessions throughout the intervention focused on the role of grace in the life of the disciple. Many of the project participants grew up in more narrow-minded churches that did not focus often upon the central importance of grace; consequently they wanted to emphasize the importance of grace for following Jesus in the new covenant.

Even though the field notes and the outside expert both emphasized the importance of the better covenant theme, the lack of data on this theme from the narrative questionnaire indicates that this might not have been a necessary action item in the
covenant of discipleship itself. While disciples living under a new covenant is of extreme importance both in the text of Hebrews and in the process of following Jesus, it is almost so foundational that we simply assume it. Since discipleship is only possible by living under the covenant of Jesus, this action item possibly could have been included in the preamble as something that we acknowledge takes place before the process of growing as a disciple even begins. This action point used language of offering ourselves as sacrifices, but this could easily have been included in the next action point, which focused on growth through suffering.

Moses instructed the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai that they were the people of God because God redeemed them and gave them a covenant. The author of Hebrews utilized the central section of his sermon to instruct his listeners that they were the people of God because God redeemed them and gave them a covenant. Disciples today must acknowledge that the only reason discipleship is possible is that God redeemed us through Jesus and gave us a better way to live under the new covenant.

**Forty Years of Wandering—Endurance through Suffering**

When the Israelites first reached the edge of the promised land, they sinned in their lack of faith, not believing that God would deliver the land into their hands. Because of this disbelief, God punished the Israelites with forty years of wilderness wanderings, during which an entire generation died out. Yet even though this suffering occurred at the hand of God, God used that period of difficulty to shape and mold the Israelites into a people who would possess an even greater faith than the generation that witnessed the ten plagues and walked across the sea on dry ground. God can use suffering as a tool for discipleship if believers will respond with the appropriate endurance.
The fourth action item in our covenant of discipleship states “Acknowledging that throughout the history of God’s kingdom, God has used suffering as a tool that shapes believers’ lives, we commit to endure hardships and trials as opportunities for the Spirit to refine us so that we can follow in the footsteps of the suffering Jesus.” This action item reflected the groups’ understanding of the exhortations of Hebrews, specifically chapter 11, which held up followers of God throughout the history of Israel who suffered for the faith. This also ties into the concluding exhortations in chapters 12 and 13, which encourage disciples to follow the example of the suffering Jesus, who found glory only by going “outside the camp.”

In particular, the group wanted to ensure the inclusion of this action item because many of the participants had personal experiences in which they grew though their own suffering and because the issue of theodicy poses such a problem for both disciples and non-believers alike. Often it is in suffering that people either grow closer to God and the Christian community or use their suffering as a reason to pull farther away from God and church. This was one of the action items that received little attention during the construction phase of the covenant of discipleship document because everyone readily agreed on the necessity of suffering as a discipleship principle.

Although the idea of suffering as a part of discipleship arose throughout the intervention sessions, session 5 directly addressed this topic and covered Hebrews 11-13. While this session included group discussion, some of the conversation took on a more subdued tone as participants shared periods of suffering in their own lives. The seriousness of this topic resulted in a great deal of reflection as the group considered the role of suffering in discipleship. Ultimately, the field notes from this session record that
the group understood the exhortation to the Hebrew community to be that only by suffering can disciples follow the example of Jesus. One participant summarized this session well when he said, “Suffering puts us in a place of choice. It is easy to obey when things are good. When things are bad we have to choose obedience. And if Jesus, even though he was the son, could only learn obedience through suffering, who am I that I think I can get through it without suffering?” The field notes clearly reflect the necessity of the inclusion of an action item on suffering in the covenant of discipleship.

When envisioning a fully implemented covenant of discipleship at GCC, the research participants repeatedly noted the necessity of growing through suffering. One participant in his questionnaire response stated that this covenant of discipleship holds the potential to help GCC members to “selflessly give as Jesus did, sacrificing time, material wealth, and themselves in a loving manner that generates an atmosphere of caring and family in the community.” Jesus selflessly endured suffering for others; disciples must do the same. Another participant noted that this covenant of discipleship creates “an expectation of challenge” that he links to “growing maturity, intellectual honesty, service, and community life.” Yet again, this links suffering and spiritual growth. One final participant stated, “God refines me when I personally am struggling, and he teaches me and refines my faith as I watch and allow people to minister to me.” Stated simply, suffering refines the faith of the disciple.

One participant especially noted how the covenant of discipleship document holds the potential to make GCC a place where God enables people to find healing through their suffering. He wrote, “We would become a place where people felt comfortable sharing difficult struggles in the full knowledge that their confessions would only be met
by love and support.” Another participant supported this premise when he stated, “Because of our hope, our love for Christ and outward focus toward others could be maintained in triumph or in suffering.” Not only does the covenant of discipleship hold the potential to help GCC members view their own suffering as a discipleship step, but it also could help GCC as a congregation become a place that helps other people work through the suffering in their lives.

Even though Gaylor’s evaluation of the covenant of discipleship document did not make specific mention of the necessity of suffering in the discipleship process, the text of Hebrews, the field notes, and the repeated emphasis in the narrative questionnaires support the inclusion of this theme in the final discipleship document. Just as Israel grew through suffering in the wilderness and just as Jesus was “made perfect” through his suffering, so too should disciples today learn to view suffering as a means by which God can bring about spiritual growth and make disciples more like Jesus.

**As for Me and My House—Virtue**

After the Israelites completed the conquest of the promised land, Joshua proclaimed to all Israel that on that day they would have to make a choice as to what kind of life they wanted to live. They could chose to become like the nations around them and live in chaos, or they could chose to follow the Lord and keep his commandments. Joshua urged the people to choose the path of righteousness, boldly declaring that he and his house would serve the Lord. The path of discipleship requires serving the Lord in virtue.

The sixth action item in our covenant of discipleship states “Acknowledging that our goal is to be like Christ, we commit to seeking the virtues that he exemplified, including sharing our possessions, welcoming others in his name, living lives of purity,
and embracing opportunities to serve people.” Much of the impetus for this action item comes from the final chapters of Hebrews, in which the preacher exhorts his listeners to embrace virtue in response to the work done by Jesus. During the construction of the covenant of discipleship document, this particular action item received the most attention, as the group debated on what specific virtues to list. We knew that we could not list all of the pertinent virtues of the Christian life, but we wanted to include a sample that would challenge GCC members to uphold a high ideal of ethical behavior and reflect well the life of Jesus.

The field notes indicate that session 6, which focused primarily on the role of virtue in discipleship, was one of the most balanced sessions in terms of discussion. Not only was the discussion during this session lively, but it also included discussion from all twelve participants who were present. I attribute much of the discussion during this session to the practicality of the material and to the plethora of virtues that disciples develop as we seek to become more like Jesus. Everyone present heartily agreed with the need for virtue in the life of disciples both during session 6 and throughout the project intervention.

The research participants’ questionnaires made numerous references to the importance of virtue in the life of discipleship. Summarizing the theme well, one participant envisioned that the covenant of discipleship document would help GCC depend on the Holy Spirit. He wrote, “We would depend on the Holy Spirit, freely submitting to his transforming power and celebrating the results of a life that reflects Jesus more clearly over time.” One participant dreamed of a future for GCC in which every member sought to live out the congregation’s mission statement by infusing Jesus’s
teachings into our lives. He wrote, “This infusion of Jesus’s teachings into our lives sets standards for how we minister to each member of the body of Christ and how we reach and affect the lives of those outside of the body in our community.” Discipleship necessitates the formation of virtue.

Often these references in the questionnaires came by way of listing specific virtues that stood out as important to them. One specifically mentioned the need to cultivate the virtue of hospitality and openness, especially toward those from different religious backgrounds. One older female participant envisioned that the covenant document would lead to “greater love and caring shown among GCC members.” She stated that GCC currently does a good job of loving each other, but this document would enable a much larger percentage of the congregation to be involved in loving and caring for one another. All of the narrative questionnaires either implicitly or explicitly referred to the formation of virtue as a necessary component of discipleship.

Gaylor’s evaluation of the covenant of discipleship commended the practicality of the document. He embraced its overall goal of an “ongoing effort to more faithfully commit to God and each other through this covenant.” He also commended the “tangible ways people can commit together to practice discipleship and live out the mission of GCC.” Ultimately the process of discipleship is meaningful only if the principles and practices of following Jesus result in becoming more like him in virtue.

Just as Joshua challenged the Israelites to choose virtue and the author of Hebrews exhorted his community to virtue, so too should the disciples of today follow Jesus in a life of virtue. All three triangulation pieces support the commitment to holiness.
and living as Jesus did. Discipleship, or following Jesus, requires a life in pursuit of virtue.

**Living in the Promised Land—Rewards of Faith**

The promised land was a land flowing with milk and honey, full of cities the Israelites did not build and vineyards and orchards the Israelites did not plant. When the Israelites finally settled in the promised land, they recognized what a good land it was, and they recognized that this land was fully a gift from God. When a disciple is faithful through the journey of following God, God will bless that disciple with great rewards.

The last action item in our covenant of discipleship states “Acknowledging that God has graciously offered us innumerable blessings, including ultimate rest and peace, we commit to boldly live in God’s presence and experience the joy that can be found only through persevering in a life of discipleship.” Even though in the project sessions themselves the group included this step earlier (session 3), we moved this to the end of the covenant of discipleship document because we felt that it formed a good point on which to end, as it assumes that when we complete the previous action items and commit to Jesus, God will continually bless us. This final action item ends the document on a hopeful note full of joy that envisions the discipleship process as a blessing, not a burden.

The field notes that most specifically address the rewards of faith are those from session 3, but numerous sessions comment upon the blessings of following Jesus. Overall, the participants felt that GCC is a loving family and on numerous occasions during the sessions felt that we should build our vision of discipleship off of that strength. Session 3 specifically featured an excessive amount of discussion, as participants displayed excitement in discussing the blessings of faith. I had to repeatedly steer the
conversation back to the text of Hebrews so that we could examine the particular rewards enumerated in the text. Specifically, this session focused on the themes of “rest” and “peace” found only through persevering in discipleship, and the group readily agreed that these blessings form a focus for why we continue as disciples; disciples have a different worldview from the world because of the rest and peace available only through Jesus.

The group also focused on the imagery from Hebrews 10-12, which promises disciples access to the very presence of Almighty God and ties this to participation in the Christian community. One participant posited, “And when we come together to worship, we get to join the heavenly worship service surrounded by thousands of angels in joyful assembly.” These promises from God of joy, peace, and access to divinity that come through a life of discipleship clearly made an impact on the participants, as is reflected in the field notes.

The narrative questionnaires also repeatedly emphasized the rewards of discipleship. One respondent specifically noted how much easier it is to see the rewards of faith after having lived for many years apart from the Christian community. He writes, “He [God] has blessed me every day, including then, and continues to do so. Looking back and seeing his guiding hand every step of the way even when I didn’t think he was there makes me more determined to declare him as Lord and make him the head of my life.” Another participant recognized these rewards within the context of the body of Christ. He desires that GCC be “a church that gathers regularly out of desire, not obligation, with a sense of purpose, eagerly anticipating what we might give and receive for the building up of the body.” An additional participant mentioned how living within this covenant context changes our ultimate outlook. She remarked that because of this
changed perspective, we would be “living our lives everyday with the spirit of Jesus Christ, knowing he has given us eternal life.” Another woman wrote, “It’s hard to live with a good attitude all of the time. But if we are focused on the joy that comes by living a life of discipleship, that joy will seep out from us and be contagious to the rest of the family.” The narrative questionnaires indicate that a clear understanding of the blessings of God is a necessary component of discipleship.

In Gaylor’s outside evaluation he repeatedly emphasized God’s grace in initiating and cultivating the life of disciples. Specifically, he stated that the “joy and enlivenment” can only exist for believers living out the principals enumerated in the covenant of discipleship document. Regarding the action item on rewards, he wrote, “Of all the commitments, it is broadest and actually serves as a good summation of the entirety of the covenant.” His evaluation, along with the field notes and narrative questionnaire, support the emphasis placed on the rewards of faith in GCC’s covenant of discipleship. Just as Israel received motivation to follow God because of the peace and rest of the promised land, so too should disciples today follow God as a means of enjoying the blessings available only through dwelling in the presence of God Almighty.

The Tribes Divide—Unplanned Themes

Even before the Israelites completed the conquest of Canaan, the various tribes turned to their own individual lands and concerns. The unity of the previous generation dissipated, and unforeseen consequences arose. Within any venture unforeseen turns in the journey arise as various viewpoints strain against a myopic vision, and the construction of the covenant of discipleship for the membership of GCC proved no
exception. Below are the most salient themes that emerged outside of those planned, which were then intentionally included in the final covenant document.

One theme that repeatedly emerged both in the field notes and in the narrative questionnaire was an emphasis on evangelism as part of the discipleship process. Even though a focus on sharing the gospel with nonbelievers did not emerge from our examination of the exhortations of Hebrews during the intervention, the group insisted that we include an action item on evangelism during the construction of the covenant document. This led directly to the action item “Acknowledging that someone loved us enough to share with us the Gospel, we commit to taking part in sharing the good news.” In part, this focus on evangelism came from the group’s examining the covenant of discipleship created for the leadership team in 2011 that highlighted evangelism, and in part this focus came from the passion of the group for sharing the gospel. The field notes for session 8 record how towards the end of the session a discussion occurred in which the group and I debated about whether to include a reference to evangelism under the action item for virtue or whether sharing the gospel deserved its own emphasis in the covenant document. After discussing it, the group decided to create a separate action item in our covenant for evangelism.

The narrative questionnaires also indicated their belief that the covenant document could aid GCC in our evangelistic efforts. One questionnaire devoted an entire paragraph to sharing the gospel and stated, “This document will be invaluable in firing up our reserve to bring God’s love to everyone we meet and to be a family that serves our neighbors.” Another participant said, “I dream that we could have some very serious and open discussions about real here-and-now strategies to share our faith and accountability
in doing that.” Overall, the inclusion of evangelism as part of the process of discipleship proved to be important to the project participants and also important for the process of discipleship.

Another theme related to evangelism that emerged from the intervention was the theme of service. The project participants wanted to ensure that the growth of disciples did not become a process simply to draw us as individuals closer to God, but also a process that helped other people. As with the emphasis on evangelism, it was during session 8 that the group desired to add an additional action item to the covenant document that ensured that GCC disciples would maintain an outward focus with our spiritual growth. The last action item we wrote states, “Acknowledging that spiritual growth is a process, we commit to regular periods of self-reflection in which we will examine how the fruit of the Spirit is growing in our lives and how we are developing and using our spiritual gifts for service.”

Multiple questionnaires also discussed the importance of developing the fruit of the Spirit for service. One participant expected that the covenant document would help GCC connect our theology of God directly with an encouragement to better serve people around us. Another participant picked up on this theme of service when he wrote, “We would count it a privilege to be a part of God’s work, generously contributing our time and resources, which we acknowledge are gifts from him.” One final participant said, “I envision that classes and small group times will be full of mentorship conversations in which the older, more experienced members can talk about struggles they’ve faced and how they overcame [them].” Maintaining an outward focus with the discipleship process proved to be an important inclusion in the GCC discipleship document.
The People Grumble—Critique

Even though both Moses and Joshua struggled mightily to lead the people, neither of them was perfect, and both of them dealt with justified criticism. The covenant of discipleship document created for the membership at GCC is also not a perfect work, even within the document itself acknowledging its limitations; and before it was ever implemented, it had already received a few notable critiques.

One critique of the final covenant document that emerged both in the field notes and within Gaylor’s evaluation is the incongruence between the language typically spoken at GCC and the lofty language of the covenant document. Gaylor wrote, “Some stretching is good, but if GCC participants stretch too much with vocabulary and ways of speaking, the actual keeping of the covenant is at risk.” This same concern also arose in the final session during the intervention. During the covenant creation process itself, one participant commented that in her work for writing government documents, her superiors regularly instruct her to write at an eighth grade level. She feared that not everyone at GCC could handle the language of the document. The covenant document utilizes language inaccessible to all of GCC’s members, and in order for it to reach its maximum effectiveness, we will have to find a way to overcome the language barrier.

Another area of critique of the covenant document is disagreement concerning the purpose for which we wrote it and how it would be implemented. The silences regarding purpose and implementation troubled both the participants and Gaylor. Gaylor specifically questioned whether there was any plan for an implementation that would include accountability. He warned, “Without any accountability, however, the covenant might become a piece of paper filed away somewhere instead of a document breathing
joy into the participant's life of discipleship….Dream together about how to best practice accountability.” The field notes reflect that in both sessions 7 and 8 the participants struggled to understand the true purpose of the covenant of discipleship. They questioned whether this was an agreement the members of GCC would make with each other, or with God, or whether signing this document would be mandatory for future membership at GCC. Much of this struggle centered around whether this was an extra-biblical creed or something akin to other movements in other churches that turned the concept of accountability into a manipulative means of controlling people. Both the field notes and independent expert agreed that the covenant document’s silence on purpose and implementation remained a problem.

Conclusion

All three evaluative pieces indicate that the covenant of discipleship created for the members of GCC holds the potential to be an effective tool for the formation of disciples. While the document itself is not perfect and will require future work to reach its maximum effectiveness, the intervention itself achieved its goal of creating a manageable tool to facilitate members of GCC in their journey to become more like Jesus. The metaphor of the Israelites reaching the peace of the promised land serves as a good image for viewing the life of discipleship today: if disciples will continue to trust God and follow his voice with the community of believers, true peace and ultimate rest awaits.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

My ministry is devoted above all else to helping people become disciples of Jesus Christ. At the outset of this project, I identified the lack of a covenant of discipleship as a specific step I could take to help GCC members grow closer to Jesus as disciples. By utilizing the theology of Hebrews as a means by which GCC can examine principles of discipleship, I walked alongside a purposive sample of GCC members in order to address this need. Below I will discuss my interpretations based upon the triangulated data discussed above. I then will discuss the implications this project has both for the church and for me personally. Finally I will pose some unanswered questions that may warrant further research.

Interpretations

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus leaves the eleven disciples with the Great Commission, instructing them to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Throughout history, Christians have taken this commission and applied it as the directive of the church in every age; the church is about the business of making disciples through baptism and instruction in the faith. My role as the senior pulpit minister at GCC is to help facilitate the discipleship process and ultimately help the church carry out the Great Commission. This project successfully formulated a one-page covenant of discipleship document directly designed to assist and simplify the process of spiritual growth, both for current and future members of GCC. Prior to the creation of this
document, no single plan for discipleship existed at GCC apart from the unintentional and assumed plans that individual leaders or members possessed for themselves. As stated above, in 2011 the leadership team formulated a covenant of discipleship for that team and, based on the success of that project, have ever since desired to carry out a similar work for the membership as a whole. This project takes the next step in fully implementing an intentional discipleship path for the entire congregation.

Ultimately, the success or failure of this project will not be known until after the leadership team at GCC implements the covenant document and allows sufficient time to determine whether the document assists in the formation of disciples. All three of the triangulation tools explored in chapter 4 envision that the covenant of discipleship will better enable members at GCC to grow closer to Jesus, but everyone involved in the evaluation of the project recognizes that discipleship is a lifelong process and that significant spiritual development takes significant time. At this point, the evaluation of the covenant of discipleship’s success remains largely speculation and prayerful hope.

**Trustworthiness**

Applicability: While GCC is a unique context, located in a specific time, in a specific suburb of Atlanta, the challenges facing the congregation are similar to the struggles present in many if not most other churches throughout the world. Churches generally face issues of conflicted commitments, complacency, and the natural difficulties of prolonged endurance in the faith. The book of Hebrews, along with much of the rest of Scripture, teaches that the people of God struggled with these challenges of faith from before the exodus all the way through the apostolic age. The exhortation to prioritize spiritual growth and the community of faith is just as applicable to modern day
GCC as it was to the community of the Hebrews author, and every gathering of believers can learn more about discipleship by applying the principles of Hebrews to their context.

The conclusions of this study apply primarily to the members at GCC, and the specific principles listed in this covenant of discipleship reflect the priorities of the members of that church. Yet even though I limit my results to GCC, if another researcher were to undertake a similar project utilizing the text of Hebrews as a source for discipleship principles in a different context, much of the final product would overlap, as the discipleship principles contained in that portion of Scripture transcend context. The principles of discipleship listed in the final covenant of discipleship document are applicable to multiple contexts.

Credibility: Qualitative research naturally resists many of the measurements researchers use to examine credibility in quantitative studies; there are no percentages or mathematical tools I can use to measure the spiritual growth of the long-term membership of GCC as a whole. This does not, however, mean that qualitative research is purely subjective or that this particular project cannot withstand the rigors of credibility. In order to establish credibility in this project, I utilized the method of triangulation as outlined above in chapter 4. The field notes GCC’s administrative assistant took, along with the additions I made to those notes, followed standard procedures for qualitative research and are therefore a credible evaluative tool. By virtue of his experience in similar projects, and in the GCC context in particular, the evaluation of this project by Gaylor is also credible. The third piece of my triangulated data came from the project participants themselves in the form of a narrative questionnaire, and as knowledgeable members of GCC who are the recipients of the final product of the
project, their evaluation is also credible. All three sources together provide a level of credibility to this project greater than the sum of their individual parts. The covenant of discipleship created as a result of this project is credible as a source for promoting discipleship in the GCC context.

Reflexivity: Part of my intention in undertaking this project was to help GCC as a whole in its mission to form disciples in the image of Jesus Christ. I not only led the conception of this project, taught the sessions, and drafted most of the final covenant document, but I also was primarily responsible for the selection of the project participants. Even though I endeavored to make the final product of this project a work of the congregation and not simply my own work, I undoubtedly had a tremendous influence on the result of this project. This was both unavoidable and not wholly undesirable. Simply by asking questions about discipleship and framing the project in the manner in which I framed it, I hopefully influenced everyone involved to take the task of discipleship more seriously. While I did influence my results due to my role as both researcher and participant/leader, if I influenced people in a manner in which they will lead more Christ-like lives, then I am blessed to have been an influence. The success of this intervention began long before the final draft of the covenant of discipleship because any time a group of God’s people gathers to reflect upon God’s word, that spiritual discipline will result in an encounter with the living God.

**Significance and Implications**

Sustainability: The ultimate sustainability of this project will not be apparent until after the full implementation of the covenant document. Even after implementation, it will be many years before the leadership at GCC will be able to examine whether the
covenant of discipleship successfully aided in the process of discipleship. I am hopeful that this document will not simply collect dust in a forgotten file, but will instead be something that forms our catechesis, structures our new-member orientations, and helps direct the overall vision for the church. In order for the covenant of discipleship to truly remain a part of GCC, it will have to undergo further revisions, and each new generation of believers will have to re-study the process of discipleship to ensure the relevance of the document to the current struggles of the membership. In many ways this document represents the mid-point in a larger conversation on discipleship that will continue as long as GCC commits to making followers of Jesus.

Personal Significance: Common wisdom says that people learn more by teaching than they do by being students. By leading a group of GCC members through a study of the exhortations of Hebrews and then reflecting on the process of discipleship today, I learned more about discipleship than I ever could have by sitting in a class or reading a book on the subject. As I have continued in my ministry in the months after the intervention itself ended, I find myself continually drawn to the discipleship principles enumerated in our covenant document. When I visit the sick, the principle of endurance becomes immediately applicable. When I have opportunities to study the Bible with non-believers I grow excited to share with them the rewards of the faith. In my preaching and teaching I continue to turn to the exhortation of drawing closer to the community and practicing virtue. Simply by engaging in a protracted study of the word of God, I have been enriched in my personal spiritual journey and my ministry.

Another significance of this project to my life and ministry has been in the learning of qualitative methods of research and reflection. This project forced me to fully
identify a problem in a particular context and then look for a theological foundation for addressing that problem. So often in ministry I face the temptation to rush solutions rather than to slow down and systematically process problems and then reflect on interventions. The method of addressing problems I practiced in this project will continue to guide my interventions in future ministry situations.

Ecclesial Significance: While I am grateful for the personal significance this project has had upon me and my ministry, I am more excited about the significance this project has begun to have for GCC as a whole. Even while the intervention was still in progress, members at GCC outside of the project participants asked what it was we were doing and began thinking more for themselves about the process of discipleship. By beginning a conversation in this intervention about discipleship with a small group of participants, members throughout GCC have already thought more deeply about how to grow closer to Jesus.

Another significance of this project is that within the group of participants, conversations and relationships occurred among people who would not normally spend time together. As the participants reflected upon Scripture together and sought to apply it to their own lives, they began forming connections and achieving a greater unity as a church. Again, this project represents a point somewhere in the middle of a larger conversation at GCC and in Christendom as a whole about discipleship that will continue for as long as people desire to be more like Jesus.

Theological Significance: Essential to Hebrews is the understanding that following Jesus is worth any cost, and in fact the cost is essential to becoming more like Jesus. The ultimate theological significance of this project is nothing less than the
salvation offered by Jesus, the greater high priest and pioneer of the faith. This project invites members at GCC to follow Jesus “outside the camp” and join him on the only journey that really matters. By following Jesus, we will finally achieve the rest and peace available only to those who endure.

Questions Still Unanswered

The largest question still unanswered regards how GCC will fully implement this covenant of discipleship. In the covenant of discipleship developed for the leadership at GCC in 2011, the leadership team participated in a signing ceremony in which they celebrated the implementation of their covenant. The logistics involved in holding a similar ceremony for the over two hundred members of GCC make a similar signing celebration difficult but not impossible. One immediate suggestion from the leadership team has been to plan a sermon series based upon the discipleship principles enumerated in the covenant and each week ask the membership to agree to that principle. In the future, GCC could include the covenant of discipleship in our new member orientation materials and ask those new members for a verbal agreement that such a course of discipleship is something that they will pursue as part of their membership with GCC. Other suggestions for widespread implementation and celebration of the covenant will occur among the leadership in the future.

Another unanswered question first arose within the intervention itself from one of the participants: should GCC create multiple variations of the covenant of discipleship so that it would be more applicable to different age groups? Further, do individual ministries within GCC need similar, more context-specific covenants? A future project might seek to create covenants for the various age and life-situation groups at GCC, such as one
document for children, one for youth, one for new Christians and one for established Christians. Such documents could better fit the needs of each group and could also contain language more accessible than that in the current covenant of discipleship.

The most important question still unanswered is, is this covenant document helpful to members over the long-term life of a disciple? If over time this question indicates that the covenant of discipleship document failed to meet its objectives, then GCC will continue to wrestle with the issues of discipleship because the need for an intentional discipleship process will still exist. Even if this document does not facilitate discipleship as hoped, however, the benefits of doing this project at GCC of walking alongside a group of people who reflected upon following Jesus still makes this project worth the effort.

**Conclusion**

Formulating a covenant of discipleship holds all of us at GCC to a higher standard of what it means to follow Jesus. The work required to create a covenant document stretched me as a minister and as a student of God’s word. My prayer is that this project will prove to be beneficial to GCC and through that loving body be beneficial to God’s larger kingdom. As we seek to “go outside the camp” and join with Jesus on our journey to the promised land, we eagerly await his promised rest.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Exemption Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
220 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29403, Abilene, Texas 79699-29403
325-674-2885

October 30, 2015

Mr. David Chisholm
Graduate School of Theology
ACU Box 29422
Abilene Christian University

Dear Mr. Chisholm,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship for the Membership of the Gwinnett Church of Christ™ is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46.102b).

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

cc: Dr. Carson Reed
APPENDIX B

Ethnographic Prompts

1. Tell me your GCC story.
2. From what practices at GCC do you most benefit?
3. What do you consider the strengths of GCC?
4. What would you say is an area in which GCC could improve?
5. What makes GCC different from other churches?
6. Most churches operate by the 80%/20% rule. Do you believe this to be true of GCC?
7. Consider the three areas of life expressed in our mission statement: a loving family, living for God, serving our neighbors. How well do we approach these three things?
APPENDIX C

Covenant of Discipleship Crafted by Drew Gaylor and the GCC Leadership Team in 2011

COVENANT OF DISCIPLESHIP

Purpose Statement: Our Covenant of Discipleship names the ways we seek to perform a life of discipleship, which we perform personally and communally in order to glorify God, maintain our identity as followers of Jesus Christ, participate with the Holy Spirit in our spiritual formation, and enliven our experience of the Christian life.

Preamble
Our Covenant of Discipleship is affirmed and owned by all members of our leadership team, which includes shepherds, deacons, and their spouses. Our intention is that keeping this covenant will deepen and enliven our participation in the process of discipleship, “discipleship” meaning: the self-understanding of Christian believers as followers of Jesus Christ and what such a way of life requires, implies, and entails. Additionally, discipleship is a process of learning Jesus, imitating his way of living, and practicing his way of living personally and communally.

For us, naming this document as a covenant generates certain characteristics and expectations. By agreeing to this covenant, we are committing ourselves to God and to each other, and we practice these discipleship behaviors with these commitments in mind. We also practice the identified behaviors as responsive obedience to the gracious summons of Christ to this life of discipleship, as a spiritual discipline practiced on a daily basis, as a way of cultivating deeper spiritual friendships, and as a way of maintaining our identity as followers of Jesus Christ.

The individuals who are part of our leadership team will evolve over time, and as new members of the team are added, they will be asked to abide by this Covenant of Discipleship. Additionally, this covenant is a living document, and it will require periodic modification, revision, and enhancement. The leadership team will make and agree on these modifications when they are deemed necessary in order to address the given needs of the group at that time.

The following practices are broad categories accompanied by clear explanations for how we seek to “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.” While not exhaustive, these practices are aspirations for how we can more intentionally perform the process of discipleship. These practices will cultivate a
life of serving others, loving God and loving neighbor, action and contemplation. They will also enable us to honor the discerned values of discipleship expressed in GCC’s mission statement: “A Loving Family, Living for God, and Serving our Neighbors.

Finally, we venture forward into the keeping of this covenant with this promise from Christ, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

**Practices Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining a Life of Discipleship**

- **Love God**
  - Choose to live a life of worship, allegiance, obedience, and joy
    - Worship God daily through prayer, study, and lifestyle
    - Worship God weekly (normally with GCC)
  - Deny self
    - Periodically fast from food, technology, entertainment, or activities
    - Give to GCC, charitable organizations, and others proportionately and sacrificially (money, resources, and time)

- **Love Neighbors**
  - Serve
    - Choose to put the needs of others above your own
    - Do something for someone else daily, and do so joyfully
    - Show hospitality to everyone
    - With words and lifestyle, proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God
  - Forgive
    - In our daily prayers, acknowledge our received forgiveness from God and forgive others
    - Treat others with respect, kindness, and compassion
    - Listen with open and non-judgmental mind to the words and ideas of others receiving them in good faith with the best intentions in mind

- **Work Together**
  - Build and maintain unity
    - Promote and encourage unity through words and actions
    - Appreciate diversity, honor each other’s dignity, and realize that unity is not predicated on others agreeing with me
    - Discover what is best for the entire leadership team and church family instead of seeking what is best for a particular individual or small group
  - Strengthen our experience of community at GCC by investing in people more than programs, encouraging each other, and spurring one another on to love and good deeds
  - Get together with each other as much as possible
  - Be a contributing member of at least one connection group
  - Share gifts, experiences, resources, and time for the sake of each other

- **Pray**
  - Spend time in prayer (offering praise and thanksgiving as well as speaking and listening to God) on a daily basis
Pray together as much as possible and follow up with each other concerning specific prayer requests
Pray regularly for leadership team, church family, and others
Pray regularly for God’s kingdom to grow and for our prayers to spill over into our lives and actions so that we are actively proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God

- **Learn**
  - Scripture
    - Read/Listen to Scripture daily in order to grow in our knowledge of God and his will
    - Memorize Scripture regularly
  - One Another (Leadership Team, Church Family, and our neighbors)
    - Be a regular, contributing member of a Bible Class
    - Increase our social awareness by learning each other in order to grow in our capacity to love and support one another
  - Teach others the life of discipleship in formal and/or informal ways

- **Lead by Example**
  - We are servants first
  - We are asking others to imitate us as we imitate Christ
  - Faithfully love and honor your family and incorporate these discipleship behaviors into your life as an example to them
  - Faithfully love and honor every member of GCC’s family and incorporate these discipleship behaviors into your life as an example to them
  - Participate in GCC’s life together by taking ownership of your involvement, encouraging one another, and using your gifts for the sake of others

- **Practice Mutual and Gracious Accountability**
  - Maintain respect for each other by protecting confidentiality and cultivating a safe environment for everyone
  - Cultivate openness by sharing and listening each other into free speech
  - Cultivate and maintain both a culture of prayer and different avenues to share prayer requests and answered prayers
  - Enjoy our time together and encourage spontaneity and creativity in implementing these discipleship behaviors
  - Empower and help each other perform these discipleship practices
    - Take ownership of your growth in these discipleship practices by participating in one of the available avenues for follow-up and reflection
    - Examples of available avenues include prayer groups (one will meet regularly before Sunday morning Bible Class) and a prayer journaling group (one will meet periodically to journal prayers, growth, and God’s work among us)

To be Celebrated and Implemented in the fall of 2011
APPENDIX D

Social Game Theory Applied to GCC

A = The Authority Game
P = The Property and Resources Game
L = The Labor and Ministry Game
C = The Conflict and Political Interest Game
W = The Worship and Rituals Game
V = The Cosmology and Worldview Game
* = Average of All Social Games
APPENDIX E

Field Note Protocol

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APPENDIX F

Consent Form

Title of Study: Formulating a Covenant of Discipleship for the Membership of the Gwinnett Church of Christ

You may be eligible to take part in a research study. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you, the potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions that you may have regarding the procedures, your involvement, and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as a family member.

Please let the researchers know if you are participating in any other research studies at this time.

Also, please note that your participation is entirely voluntary. You may decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Please contact the Principal Investigator if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study or if at any time you wish to withdraw. This contact information may be found at the end of this form.

Purpose and Procedures

Purpose of the Research-- The purpose of this project is to write a covenant of discipleship for Gwinnett Church of Christ. The project will include study of the biblical text of Hebrews, group discussion, and reflection on the process of creating disciples of Jesus. These sessions will conclude with the development of a covenant of discipleship for the larger congregation of GCC which will hopefully help the congregation facilitate spiritual growth throughout its membership.

Expected Duration of Participation-- If selected for participation, you will be asked to attend 11 visits with the study staff over the course of the winter quarter (December 2015 through February 2016). Each visit is expected to take 45 minutes.
Description of the Procedures-- Once you consent to participation in the study, you will be asked to participate in the following procedures:

Study Procedures-- This project will use qualitative methods with a group of 10-12 participants from GCC formulating a representative sample of the GCC membership. The initial sessions will be spent studying the theology of Hebrews and discipleship. The final two sessions will be spent formulating a discipleship document. Upon signing this document, you understand that your ideas may be incorporated into this project thesis including the covenant of discipleship that will be utilized in the future life of GCC.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no identifiable risks to participants in this research study. All published participant quotations will remain anonymous.

The researchers and ACU do not have any plan to pay for any injuries or problems you may experience as a result of your participation in this research.

Potential Benefits

There are potential benefits to participating in this study. Such benefits may include 1) revealing more clearly God’s will for you as a disciple; 2) enhancing relationships with other members of the congregation; and 3) helping the congregation as a whole participate more fully in the process of discipleship. The researchers cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study. However, the researchers hope that the information learned from this study will help others in similar situations in the future.

Provisions for Confidentiality

Information collected about you will be handled in a confidential manner in accordance with the law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Aside from these required disclosures, your confidentiality will be protected by: 1) any information or quotations you provide will be reported anonymously in the study findings; 2) all notes obtained during the course of this study will be kept by the Principal Investigator behind two locked doors.
You may ask any questions that you have at this time. However, if you have additional questions, concerns, or complaints in the future, you may contact the Principal Investigator of this study. The Principal Investigator is David Chisholm, Senior Pulpit Minister, and may be contacted at 678-438-5638 or davidhchisholm@gmail.com.

If you are unable to reach the Principal Investigator or wish to speak to someone other than the Principal Investigator, you may contact the ACU faculty advisor for this project,

**Dr. Carson E. Reed** -- Vice President, Church Relations  
Executive Director, [Siburt Institute for Church Ministry](https://www.acu.edu/siburt)  
O. L. and Irene Frazer Chair for Church Enrichment  
**Abilene Christian University**  
325-674-3732  
carson.reed@acu.edu

If you have concerns about this study or general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU’s Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at

(325) 674-2885  
megan.roth@acu.edu  
320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103  
Abilene, TX 79699
Consent Signature Section

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all of the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form.

_________________________  ____________________________
Printed Name of Participant  Signature of Participant  Date

_________________________  ____________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent  Signature of Person Obtaining Consent  Date
APPENDIX G

Covenant of Discipleship for the Membership of the Gwinnett Church of Christ

As disciples of Jesus who have committed to living in a covenant relationship with God and God’s church, we present this Covenant of Discipleship as a vision for fulfilling the mission of the Gwinnett Church of Christ: A Loving Family, Living for God, and Serving our Neighbors. By seeking to follow Jesus as disciples, we commit to resisting the danger of complacency, and instead seek to embrace a posture of persistently dreaming about what God will continue to do through GCC.

We recognize that the following discipleship principles are not exhaustive, but represent a selection of biblical teachings about what it means to follow Jesus and be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

- Acknowledging that God is alive and continually working in the world, we commit to look for, listen to, and heed the direction God gives us through encountering scripture, praying communally and individually, and experiencing life with other disciples in ministry.

- Acknowledging the danger of falling away from faith, we commit to making the church a principal priority in our lives so that we can both give and receive encouragement, instruction, and support from the Body of Christ.

- Acknowledging that the new covenant of which we are a part is fully a work of Jesus as both high priest and ultimate sacrifice, we commit to offering our bodies as living sacrifices, putting devotion to Jesus above all else.

- Acknowledging that throughout the history of God’s Kingdom, God has used suffering as a tool that shapes believers’ lives, we commit to endure hardships and trials as opportunities for the Spirit to refine us so that we can follow in the footsteps of the suffering Jesus.

- Acknowledging that someone loved us enough to share with us the Gospel, we commit to taking part in sharing the good news.

- Acknowledging that our goal is to be like Christ, we commit to seeking the virtues that he exemplified including: sharing our possessions; welcoming others in his name, living lives of purity, and embracing opportunities to serve people.
• Acknowledging that spiritual growth is a process, we commit to regular periods of self-reflection in which we will examine how the fruits of the Spirit are growing in our lives and how we are developing and using our spiritual gifts for service.

• Acknowledging that God has graciously offered us innumerable blessings, including ultimate rest and peace, we commit to boldly live in God’s presence and experience the joy that can only be found through persevering in a life of discipleship.
I commend David Chisholm for pursuing this project thesis. It is ambitious and timely for ministers and congregations to seek more intentional and more communal ways of living as disciples of Jesus Christ. When I was the preaching minister of GCC, my project thesis focused on developing a Covenant of Discipleship for GCC’s Leadership Team with the goal of eventually sharing this with the entire church and inviting them to join the Leadership Team in committing to the principles and practices of the Covenant of Discipleship. It is great to know this goal is becoming reality and the entire congregation will be participants in this ongoing effort to more faithfully commit to God and each other through this covenant.

There is much to like in this covenant. First, I am glad to see the shorter preamble and introductory section. The first version (Leadership Team’s Covenant of Discipleship) contained a lengthy introduction in order to set the proper course for covenant keeping. All along, we acknowledged the need to shorten it, especially when it was time to share the covenant with the entire congregation. Now, the covenant and introduction fit on one page. Anything too long risks becoming too weighty or burdensome to remember and practice.

There are two other differences between this covenant and the first one that are especially noteworthy. First, the current version of the covenant does a much better job of
placing the commitment in the context of what God has done and is doing among the 
congregation. The language of acknowledgment was something missing from the first 
one, and the first covenant erred too far on the side of our role in the discipleship process. 
Acknowledging God’s work with each commitment is the perfect antidote for self-
righteousness. Our actions are always a response to God’s grace, and the 
acknowledgement formula is an effective preventative measure against this danger.

Additionally, there is more openness with each commitment. The original version 
was a little too prescriptive with actions and content. The current version is much more 
open without sacrificing clarity. There is sufficient clarity and direction while allowing 
each person the freedom to find their own ways to live out these commitments. Freedom 
is important because it allows for more spontaneity, creativity, and individual ownership.

Regarding improvement, there are two categories of responses. The first is one of 
inquiry and seeks to encourage precision and practicality. The second is one of 
suggestion. My expertise comes from my study on this topic and from working with 2 
different leadership teams and congregations on covenants over the course of several 
years. Hopefully, my inquiries and suggestions will prove helpful and lead to greater 
participation in both the discipleship process and GCC’s mission.

With regards to inquiry, I will echo some of the feedback given to me in the 
evaluation of the first covenant and my project thesis. Pay special attention to verbiage 
and vocabulary. Does the language reflect the way the people of GCC typically speak? 
Do the word choices resonate with the way the people of GCC talk about matters of 
discipleship? There does not need to be an exact match here, but the goal is to have a 
covenant that is clear, precise, and fits the context. Some stretching is good, but if GCC
participants stretch too much with vocabulary and ways of speaking, the actual keeping of the covenant is at risk.

Another line of inquiry is to consider accountability and the methodology of how each participant takes ownership of their own participation in the covenant. The real power from covenants comes from regular practice and interaction with the covenant itself. How is accountability practiced? Will everyone sign it? Will there be a signing ceremony? Accountability is a difficult dimension of covenants. Legalism and self-righteousness are persistent pitfalls. Freedom and accountability must be held in balance, and accountability must always be mutual and gracious. Without any accountability, however, the covenant might become a piece of paper filed away somewhere instead of a document breathing joy into the participant’s life of discipleship. Prayer groups and/or small groups are natural places for such conversations, but there are others as well. Dream together about how to best practice accountability.

Regarding suggestions, the first two actually build on the strengths of this covenant. As noted above, the covenant is shorter than the Leadership Team covenant developed in 2011. I think there is potential to shorten and streamline the covenant even further, especially with the eight commitments. Covenants are not meant to be exhaustive (as you note in the introduction), and there are a couple of ways they can be shortened for the sake of clarity and ease of practice. The commitment focused on sharing faith (fifth commitment) accomplishes this perfectly. Time and effort can be spent on adapting the others to fit this example. Additionally, I wonder if the eight commitment might fit better in the introduction. Of all the commitments, it is broadest and actually serves as a good summation of the entirety of the covenant.
Another strength of the covenant is the acknowledgement language of the covenant. With the exception of the second commitment, the language of acknowledgement is positive and focuses on God, Christ, and/or spiritual blessings. The second commitment begins with noting the danger of falling away. While falling away is a danger, I would suggest changing the wording to fit the rest of the document. The motivation to participate in community is rooted in God’s gracious gathering and beginning with positives always leads to more joy and enlivenment when it comes to living out these commitments.

Along these same lines, the last sentence of the first paragraph begins with resisting complacency and ends with embracing a posture of persistently dreaming. Covenant keeping and discipleship itself are in response to the gracious summons of Christ. Maintaining this order is a helpful way to strengthen our resistance to legalism and self-righteousness. Grace always comes before the call to obedience, and the majority of this document honors this. The two locations noted here are only outliers, and the covenant as a whole honors the divine order of antecedent grace and responsive obedience. Another way to build on the acknowledgment theme and flow of the covenant is to attach a verse or passage to each commitment. Doing so grounds each commitment in Scripture and will help some of the more reticent members of the congregation adopt the covenant and each commitment.

My final suggestion has to do with future revisions. One of the keys with covenants is to regularly reevaluate and reaffirm. How often will this be done? Covenants are living documents, and noting this somehow might be helpful. Noting this in the document itself serves as a reminder to revisit and reevaluate. You and GCC will
continue to learn a lot about discipleship and covenant keeping, and it will be important to have mechanisms in place to capture your learnings.

Overall, the covenant is balanced and comprehensive regarding discipleship practices. It also provides tangible ways people can commit together to practice discipleship and live out the mission of GCC. I am excited to hear how this project unfolds and even more excited about how God will bless your ministry and every GCC member’s spiritual life through this covenant. Thank you for including me in this project, and I hope this evaluation proves helpful.
BRIEF VITA

I was born in Maryville, Tennessee, on March 8, 1983. In 2005 I graduated from Oklahoma Christian University with a bachelor of arts in Bible and ministry. One week after graduation, I married Rachael Powell of Albuquerque, New Mexico. We have two children: Lucas (2009) and Samuel (2013). I continued my education at Abilene Christian University and completed the master of divinity degree in December 2007. Beginning the first week of 2008, I began serving as the pulpit minister for the Rockwall and Brin Church of Christ in Terrell, Texas, where I entered the doctor of ministry program through Abilene Christian University in the spring of 2013. In the fall of 2013 I accepted the position of senior pulpit minister for the Gwinnett Church of Christ.