

A Rule of Life for Home: Equipping Churches to Develop and Engage a Ministry of  
Faith Formation at Home

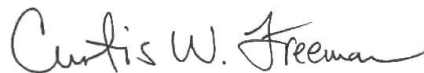
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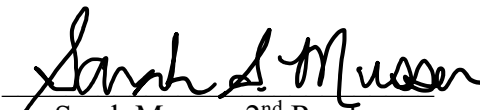
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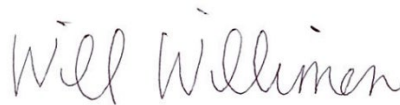
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Will Willimon, D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School  
of Duke University

2023

ABSTRACT

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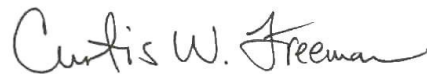
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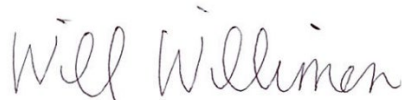
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## **Abstract**

Many Christians struggle to be significantly formed by their faith through the traditional practices and ministries of the local church. The prevalence and power of competing voices in our culture create exhaustion and fragmentation. Busy schedules, work demands, and extracurricular activities add to this struggle, monopolizing many households' time and availability. Acknowledging the continual decline in church attendance and engagement across denominational affiliations and traditions, and current research that clearly reveals the necessity of the institutional church for faith development, I will explore some of the ways the church can begin shifting its faith formation practices to help congregants rediscover the deep center of their being in Christ and grow in their faith.

Mining the depths of the Christian tradition, I will explore how the church can expand its educational ministries by reinstating the ancient process of catechesis, which is how the church practiced faith formation for its first three centuries of existence. Arguing that the home is the primary source of faith and values, I will provide the church a method for extending the catechumenate outside the walls of the church by equipping families for the work of faith formation in the home.

Drawing from deep within the well of church history, I will examine the core Christian values of early monastic *rules* that believers must develop in order to participate in the life and mission of Jesus. Utilizing Aristotle's process for cultivating virtues, I will examine the spiritual disciplines and shared practices of Augustine's and Benedict's *rules* to provide concrete steps for habituating the core Christian values in the lives of believers. As these values are fostered in the homes of believers, Christ can begin

to transform their lives from the inside out. What I am proposing is an accessible method for churches to begin equipping families for how to live more fully in the way of Jesus that allows them to experience the *abundance* (John 10:10) that Christ promised in their homes and wherever they go.

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Parker: Your excitement and encouragement have helped me to never lose the joy of this experience. I love you more than words can say. To my parents, John and Colleen, and my brother, Keith: You continue to be an anchor that holds me steady in the storms and a sail that pushes me forward when I get stuck. You are one of the most powerful and consistent ways that I am able to hear God's voice and feel God's presence.

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## Introduction

As humans, our relationships and interactions with others constantly form us. We also live in the Information Age, with more influences shaping the average person than at any other time in history. As a result, our daily exposure not only to print and broadcast media but also to various internet platforms patterns our thinking. Some of these formative influences are within our control, while others are unforeseen and random. Regardless, they profoundly mold who we are, what we believe, and how we understand and respond to the world.

Furthermore, the convenience, efficiency, and productivity that characterize the current age create an unhealthy level of exhaustion and fragmentation in our lives, distracting us from the importance of building a strong faith. Robert Mulholland notes, “The frenetic busyness, attractions, and diversions of our world draw us out of the deep center of our being and spread us thinly across the surface of our life.”<sup>1</sup> In response to this distortion of our humanity, Christianity’s claim found throughout the New Testament maintains that humans need to find the deep center of their being in Christ.<sup>2</sup> Speaking about his purpose, Jesus explained: “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10b).<sup>3</sup> Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus asserted the necessity of being connected to him in order to experience his abundance and used the illustration of himself as the vine and believers as the branches. “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me” (Jn 15:4).

If faith is the defining characteristic of Christians that both establishes and deepens one’s relationship with Christ, how can it be cultivated and practiced consistently in the life of a

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<sup>1</sup> M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering Your True Self* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016) 144.

<sup>2</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version translation unless otherwise noted.

believer, especially amid the current pace, busyness, and competing voices of this age? How does faith grow in our chaotic milieu? Leading Christian educators Mark Maddix, Jonathan Kim, and James Estep assert that Christ-centered faith includes three elements: the mind, the will, and action.<sup>4</sup> While faith is a belief system that followers of Christ cognitively accept and affirm, it cannot be attained by humanity's striving alone; God wills faith to those who receive it as a gift. In response, faith must also be put into practice through the words and behaviors of a believer. *Faith formation* is one of the most effective means to help believers accomplish the process of faith development and growth in the Christian tradition.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Distinguishing Traits of Faith Formation**

Though faith formation, faith development, discipleship, and spiritual formation are sometimes used synonymously and defined differently within Christian scholarship, for my thesis, I will focus specifically on faith formation as the “lifelong process of growth into the image of Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

In the general sense, faith is putting one's trust and confidence in something. According to the book of Hebrews, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Faith needs an object, something in which to place one's hope. In the Christian tradition, the object of faith is Jesus Christ. As scholar and theologian Curtis Freeman notes, the Christian faith itself is “dependent on a single criterion—participation in the ministry of Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Having faith in Christ is more than believing Jesus existed; it is placing one's trust and

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<sup>4</sup> Mark A. Maddix, Jonathan H. Kim, James Riley Estep Jr, *Understanding Faith Formation: Theological, Congregational, and Global Dimensions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Maddix, Kim, Estep, *Understanding Faith Formation*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2000), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, “Mediating Ministry and the Renewal of the Church,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 31/4 (Winter 2012): 395.

confidence in the belief that Jesus is the Word of God *made flesh* as described in the Gospel of John (Jn 1:1-4).

If the Christian faith is both the belief that Jesus is Lord, as well as active participation in the ministry of Jesus, faith formation is the process of our lives being shaped by this truth and our willingness to act upon it. In doing so, we learn who we are in Christ and discover our meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in loving union with God.

Though there is some differentiation in the focus points of faith formation and faith development, their processes overlap. Faith development emphasizes more of the “human striving” nature of faith—cognitively believing in Jesus and putting those beliefs into practice through words, behaviors, and disciplines. Faith formation affirms the “human striving” of faith development, but it also stresses the divine will and work of God through one’s faith that is beyond “human striving.”<sup>8</sup>

Faith formation, therefore, is the disciplined practice of releasing our self-focused and self-reliant fragments and finding our center in God. It is the space that helps us develop a Christ-centered lens through which to interpret the avalanche of information that races toward us daily. It is the discipline that reminds us we are more than what we can do, what we have, and what others say about us; we are beloved children of God. Faith formation is the intentional process of being formed by our faith in Jesus Christ in such a way that we are progressively being conformed to the image of Christ.

Mulholland contends that being formed by one’s faith in Christ goes beyond affirming a certain set of beliefs or adopting a particular pattern of behavior; it is being engaged in a deep union with God in love.<sup>9</sup> However, faith formation specialist John Roberto asserts, “Spiritual

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<sup>8</sup> Maddix, Kim, Estep, *Understanding Faith Formation*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 19.

practices form the essential content for discipleship and faith growth.”<sup>10</sup> One of the benefits of the Information Age is that faith formation practices can be accessed through a plethora of literature, websites, organizations, and institutions online. Even though society’s current digital capabilities provide individuals with more faith formation resources and opportunities than ever before, the local church remains for many the primary source for Christian faith formation.

### **Faith Formation and the Church**

In Chapter One, I will explore the necessity of the church in the process of faith formation, as it relates to the ancient process of catechesis, which the church used for hundreds of years for the purpose of *making disciples*. I will also discuss the limitations of the church’s current faith formation model, as most denominations and congregations have long been disconnected from the catechumenate process. The Apostle Paul described Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation . . . all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:15-16). Since all things were created through Christ and for Christ, then he can certainly be experienced apart from the church. This is evident in the New Testament. Cleopas and the other disciple encountered Christ on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-16); the disciples experienced his presence on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21:4-7); and Peter heard God’s voice in a dream (Acts 10:9-16). The power of Christ’s presence and the fullness of his promises are not confined to the institutional church. However, if the church is the body of Christ as recorded by Paul in multiple epistles, then the abundance of life found in Christ cannot be fully experienced apart from the very embodiment of his presence on earth, which is the church (Rm 12:5; 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 3:6; Col 1:18).

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<sup>10</sup> John Roberto, *Lifelong Faith: Formation For All Ages and Generations* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2022), 9.

As the body of Christ, the church is inseparable from a life of faith in Christ. However, due to the variety of social, professional, and familial commitments of the current age, many Christians do not participate regularly in the church's traditional faith formation practices. As a result, the church's weekly programming is not reaching a significant number of its members. Though families must recognize that part of the problem is the way their own over-programming limits their ability to engage with the church's ministries consistently, churches must also acknowledge that even those who consistently participate in their weekly activities do not necessarily remain connected to their faith in the long term.

According to Christian education researchers Kara Powell and Chap Clark, "40 to 50 percent of kids who graduate from a church or youth group will fail to stick with their faith in college."<sup>11</sup> The data shows several discrepancies in how many ultimately return to the church once they get married and have children, as well as whether those who leave the church are actually abandoning their faith or just the church. I will argue that for many believers the church's current model of faith formation is too limited when coupled with their other commitments; thus, a new model is needed to help believers remain connected to Christ and his church over the long term.

According to the Christian tradition, a relationship with Christ is the source of healing and wholeness amid this world's competing value systems and fragmentation, and living in the abundance of Christ on earth cannot be experienced apart from his church. But if the church's current model of faith formation is not feasible or lastingly effective for many who participate in its ministry, how can the church reimagine its current model of faith formation to ensure the wholeness of Christ is forming its members despite the busyness, exhaustion, competing values,

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<sup>11</sup> Kare E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 15.

and fragmentation of this age? I will argue that the church must begin by rediscovering and reinstituting the ancient process of catechesis. As the catechumenate lays the groundwork of the basic teachings of the Christian faith, churches can begin to build on that foundation by shifting their focus to the home, which early catechetical instruction understood as an extension of the church.

### **Faith Formation and the Home**

In Chapter Two, I will consider the significance of the home in faith formation, as well as the limitations of the home on Christian formation without the support of the church. I will advocate for a stronger partnership between the church and the home, as churches shift their focus from faith formation programs within the walls of the church to equipping families for the ministry of home. Family specialists David and Kathy Lynn maintain, “though learning about faith is critical, and congregations offer many wonderful opportunities for this sort of instruction . . . the home remains the primary influence of faith and values.”<sup>12</sup> The term “home” has a variety of meanings and connotations. For many, *home* encapsulates different geographical locations, places of residence, people, and periods in their lives. Home can conjure up wonderful memories of love, support, safety, and refuge; it can also invoke painful memories of trauma and grief. Home can be a specific place, as well as a feeling of safety and belonging. For the Lynns, the home to which they refer—*the primary influence of faith and values*—is the place in which one grew up and currently resides. They contend that where we live, whom we live with, and the influences of that environment impact us more than any other aspect of our lives.

If the environment of our home is what shapes us most, for Christian families, the home must be the primary place for faith formation. Youth ministry experts David Anderson and Paul

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<sup>12</sup> David and Kathy Lynn, *Home Grown Faith* (Nashville: World Publishing, 2006) 7.

Hill contend, “Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal trusted relationships, often—but not always—in the home.<sup>13</sup> Rather than diminishing the church’s role in faith formation, I will explore how families need the church to equip and support them for consistent faith formation practices outside of regularly scheduled church ministries and services. I will propose that the church should intentionally train its members for the work of faith formation in the place and within the relationships that have the greatest influence on their lives—at home with their families.

Finding and creating this kind of Christ-centered space does not happen naturally or organically. Despite the church’s attempt to create such a space on certain days and at specific times each week, the work of faith formation needs more opportunities than one institution can provide. The authors of the Torah recognized the importance of faith formation outside of communal worship and sacrifices, which Moses’s declaration and instruction in Deuteronomy to the people of Israel to love God and pass down that love to each generation proves.<sup>14</sup>

Moses challenged God’s people to teach their children God’s word. He implored them to engage in faith practices at home every day when they rose each morning and before they slept each night. Faith formation in the home has played a major role since Moses, and it is a particularly urgent task for Christians in twenty-first-century America. Without regular rhythms and practices of faith formation in the home, our lives can easily conform more to the prevailing culture than the deep center of being in Christ. When faith formation becomes an exercise that is practiced only during regularly scheduled church events, the Christian faith can often be reduced to theological ideas: what sociologist Christian Smith calls “Moral Therapeutic Deism”; what

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<sup>13</sup> David W. Anderson and Paul Hill, *Frogs without Legs Can’t Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Lynn, *Home Grown Faith*, 10.

sociologist Tim Clydesdale refers to as the “mainstream American moral culture”; or what the philosopher Dallas Willard deemed the “gospel of sin management.”<sup>15</sup> I will explore each of these phenomena more thoroughly in Chapter Two. For now, I endorse the evidence that reveals active participation in a local church does not provide enough engagement with Christ for one’s sense of identity, meaning, and purpose to be significantly changed by a relationship with Christ if the work and patterns of faith formation are isolated to church-related ministries and events. However, to be prepared for and consistent in their faith formation practices in the home, families need the support of the larger Christian community of the church.

### **The Development of a “Rule of Life” in the Church**

Christian leaders have recognized the difficulty for believers to be deeply shaped by Christ in a way that fosters meaning and wholeness in their lives since the beginning of the institutional church. In Chapter Three, I will explore the historical response of early church fathers such as St. Augustine and St. Benedict to this problem, which was developing a “rule” for their monasteries. I will consider Paul Fiddes’ idea that “discipline, wholeness, prayer, moral transformation, transcendence of the senses, and a heightened sense of attentiveness to God and others are contained in the idea of a ‘rule of life.’”<sup>16</sup> These *rules* instituted a way of life around certain Christian values that were cultivated and held together by personal spiritual disciplines and shared practices that all agreed to uphold within their monasteries. Through this chapter, I will provide an overview of some of the Christian values, spiritual disciplines, and shared practices of early monastic *rules*, and their formative impact on these communities as they deepened each person’s relationship with God and strengthened their relationships with others.

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<sup>15</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Paul S. Fiddes and Stephen Finamore, “Baptist and Spirituality: a Rule of Life,” in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2008), 4.



Though effective in early monasteries, I will also consider how churches can begin to conceptualize applying an ancient *rule* to a modern, twenty-first-century family. For most homes, the antiquated language and outdated nature of some parts of monastic *rules* will require creative thinking and innovative practices to be incorporated in healthy ways within a contemporary context. The simplicity of believing “if it worked then, it could work again,” will prove unproductive for churches in their efforts to help families effectively utilize a historic tool today. Thus, I will conclude this chapter with practical methods for churches to consider while leading families to develop *a rule of life for home*.

### **The Values and Spiritual Disciplines of a “Rule of Life”**

In Chapter Four, I will begin by discussing certain key Christian values that Augustine’s and Benedict’s rules sought to cultivate within their monasteries, as well as the spiritual disciplines in these ancient *rules* that were practiced to develop these values. Because there is immense diversity in the structure and dynamics of families, every family’s *rule* will have some level of variation based on the size of the family, the age of each member, work schedules, calendar events, socioeconomic situation, geographical location, cultural background, and life stage. However, there will be common areas where certain faith formation practices and sacred rhythms intersect and are needed in every home, regardless of those differences.

According to leadership experts A.G. Lafley and Roger Martin, when it comes to making changes within organizations, what is cultivated within the people of the organization will determine the results of any change.<sup>17</sup> I will contend in this chapter that for families to be formed by their Christian faith, they must *cultivate a culture* within their homes through five key Christian values—love, humility, restraint, hospitality, and obedience. Using the structure of

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<sup>17</sup> A.G. Lafley and Roger Martin, *Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2013), 136.

virtue ethics, I will contend that in order for these values to be developed within believers in a way that shapes who they are and how they respond to the world, every adult in the home must commit to five key spiritual disciplines—silence, solitude, Scripture reading, prayer, and worship.

Faith formation at home will require families to develop a new set of habits around their relationship with God that foster healthier relationships with themselves and each other. These habits will necessitate discipline; they will demand each family member’s attention and intention. For many families, it will require developing a new normal around a different set of responsibilities and priorities than their current structure. The goal of a new normal created through a *rule* at home is greater than behavior modifications. As Mulholland contends, “The life hidden with Christ in God is one of such growing union with God in love that . . . the values of God’s kingdom shape our life and relationships.”<sup>18</sup> As adults begin to habituate the spiritual disciplines of a *rule* in their own lives, they can begin to *cultivate a culture* of love, humility, restraint, hospitality, and obedience in their families that allows Christ to *cultivate a people* in their homes.

### **The Shared Practices of a “Rule of Life” for Home**

In Chapter Five, I will discuss the shared practices that families must incorporate into their relationships with each other to institute *a rule of life for home*. These core practices include seven rituals for the home: shared blessings, shared meals, shared devotions and prayers, shared worship, shared meaningful conversations, shared chores and acts of service, and shared experiences. For each practice, I will provide a detailed description, its biblical significance for faith formation, and practical ways a family can apply them to their home. As families

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<sup>18</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 139.

incorporate the spiritual disciplines and shared practices of a *rule* in their homes, they can begin to develop the Christian values that will deepen their relationships with God and each other, as they are more equipped to live in the way of Jesus.

In this chapter, I will also discuss how churches can begin equipping their members for the work of faith formation at home by shifting from age-segregated programs to intergenerational ministries. I will advocate for churches to find creative and innovative ways to integrate family faith formation into everything they do as a congregation, rather than a separate program that reaches a portion of their families only part of the time. Developing a *rule of life for home* is not intended to isolate families from the church or promote the individualism of the Western culture. Instead, the hope is to draw families into deeper communion with God and one another through the shared life and common faith of the church.

## **Conclusion**

Realizing this work cannot be accomplished solely through the institutional church or individual families, my thesis will advocate for the development of a stronger partnership between the church and the homes of its congregation for faith formation. What does this mean for the institutional church? As John Roberto petitions, “Congregations need to make family faith formation one focus of everything they do as a church community.”<sup>19</sup> As the church provides faith formation for its congregation through worship, Sunday School, Bible studies, mission and service opportunities, it should also equip the congregation to engage in faith formation at home. Christian families need help to develop the confidence, competence, and comfort required to engage their faith as individuals and as a unit at home.<sup>20</sup> By leading families

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<sup>19</sup> John Roberto, “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation,” *Lifelong Faith* (Fall/Winter 2007): [https://faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/best\\_practices\\_in\\_family\\_faith\\_formation.pdf](https://faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/best_practices_in_family_faith_formation.pdf), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Roberto, “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation,” 7.

to develop *a rule of life for home*, churches can provide families with a concrete structure for engaging in this good work.

As Roberto notes, “The key is that everyone is learning together . . . in a shared experience of the Christian faith.”<sup>21</sup> By making this shift, churches can provide families with better tools for navigating the busyness, exhaustion, and fragmentation of this age. As churches lead their families to develop *a rule of life for home* that generates more consistent opportunities for them to engage in their faith with one another, they provide stronger pathways for helping their congregants form the matrix of their identity, meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in loving union with God. Rather than faith formation being compartmentalized to the ministries within the walls of the church, churches can support the daily work of families seeking to conform to the image of Christ. In this way, the church can form a lifelong living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the ministry of the home.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John Roberto, *Lifelong Faith*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson and Hill, *Frogs without Legs*, 11.

# Chapter One: Faith Formation and the Church

## Introduction

Though there are many places where God’s people can encounter him in relationship with others, the church remains central to their gathering. While we tend to think of the church as a vehicle for developing Christian faith, it also invites human interaction as believers learn about God and experience his presence together. John Wesley once wrote, “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.”<sup>1</sup> In the book of Genesis, the author wrote, “So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).<sup>2</sup> If humanity is made in the image of a Triune God whose essence is the eternal community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then a relationship with God cannot be an individual endeavor. If God is social within God’s Triune self, then Christianity must be a social religion wherein God’s people encounter a living God in relationship with those who were made in the image of God.

However, while the church offers great value to believers, it also faces a serious challenge. Despite two-thirds of Americans still identifying as Christian, church attendance in the US continues to decline across denominational affiliations and traditions. According to Pew Research, though this trend has been happening for decades, the largest growing denomination being the “nones” and the “dones,” COVID exacerbated this reality for the church.<sup>3</sup> In a

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, “Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems (1739),” in *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins, vol. 13 of *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abington, 2013), 39.

<sup>2</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version translation unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Justin Nortey and Michael Rotolo, “How the Pandemic Has Affected Attendance at U.S. Religious Services,” Pew Research Center, report March 28, 2023, [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/#:~:text=they%20did%20both,-.Trends%20in%20attendance%20among%20religious%20groups.in%20September%202021%20\(26%25\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/#:~:text=they%20did%20both,-.Trends%20in%20attendance%20among%20religious%20groups.in%20September%202021%20(26%25).).

presentation at First Baptist Church in Martinsville, Virginia, on September 23, 2023, church consultant, Mark Tidsworth, discussed the current challenges facing the Western church, noting that in 2019 the median-sized church in the US averaged 137 participants in Sunday worship; as of 2022, median-sized churches are averaging 65 Sunday worshippers in the US. In 2019, American churches could expect 44% of their congregation to volunteer in some capacity; today, only 20% of congregants will volunteer in their church.<sup>4</sup> Despite smaller congregations experiencing the greatest decline in attendance due to COVID, churches all across the US are feeling the impact of this participation drift. Though my thesis advocates for more faith formation practices outside the walls of the church and in the home, participation in the church remains central to Christ's mission and the process of faith development.

In this chapter, I will explore the relationship between faith formation and the church. I will begin by analyzing the biblical, communal, and relational significance of the church's role in forming the Christian faith within individuals and families. Defending the necessity of the institutional church as it relates to faith formation and Christian identity, I will investigate the historical significance of *catechesis* in the early church, its impact on making disciples in the first three centuries of the church, and the need for the modern church to rediscover this ancient practice. By reimagining and reinstating the catechetical process, I will contend that the church can begin to overcome its current attendance decline and the limitations of these institutional measures, moving from maintenance to mission, program-minded to people-centered, and

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Tidsworth is the founder of Pinnacle Leadership Associates, which is an ecumenical Christian organization that partners with others to advance God's mission in the world. Through coaching, consulting, and training, Pinnacle works alongside ministers, lay leaders, chaplains, and denominational representatives, as well as church staff and lay leadership teams, denominational entities, and non-profit organizations, to create vision and develop practices that promote flourishing as individuals and organizations join Christ in the restorative work of God's kingdom.

inwardly focused to socially active. Rather than diminishing the role of the church, I will argue that the institutional church is inseparable from the transforming work of making disciples.

### **The Biblical Significance of the Church**

Throughout Scripture, God's people were formed by their participation in the practices and rituals of their community. Beginning with the family of Abraham, to the Twelve Tribes of Israel, to the wandering nomadic people of Israel, to the nation of Israel formalized and established in Canaan, God's covenantal relationship with his people has always been communal. Establishing his covenant with Abram, God declared, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:1-3). God's covenant with Abraham was communal in nature (I will make you a great nation) and communal in purpose (in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed).

In the New Testament, Jesus affirmed the social nature of God's covenant with the two great commandments: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:37-39). Through this declaration, Jesus claimed that the entirety of the Torah and Tanakh, which make up most of the Old Testament canon, can be understood and purposed through one's commitment to living in loving union with God and in loving relationships with others. According to Mulholland, when Jesus offered these two commandments the "first commandment" was not intended to be elevated above the second. He

contends that a better translation is as follows: “‘You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.’ Another way to say the same thing is, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>5</sup> Rather than understanding one’s love of neighbor as secondary to loving God, loving neighbor is how we show our love for God. Our love for God is inseparable from our love for our neighbor.

Throughout his epistles, the Apostle Paul continued Jesus’s teachings on the interrelated nature of one’s relationship with God and others by stressing the importance of how we treat each other. Paul exhorted the Ephesians: “So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another” (Eph 4:25). Likewise, he encouraged the Philippians: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4). Similarly, he urged Christians living in Colossae: “Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Col 3:12-13).

Paul’s instructions on how to follow Christ are consistently coupled with directives on how to treat each other. As Mulholland writes, “Paul rooted our life of loving union with God in the context of our relationships with others . . . abandonment [to God] is incarnated in our relationships with others.”<sup>6</sup> For Paul, one of the most significant opportunities for all Christians to live out their faith in Christ in relationship to others was the church. As the body of Christ, being a part of the church was inseparable from a relationship with Christ (1 Cor 12:12-14).

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<sup>5</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 106.

<sup>6</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 106.



## The Communal Significance of the Church

According to Kavin Rowe, for early Christians, institutions were crucial for carrying forward Christ's new vision for the world.<sup>7</sup> Faith was more than believing in Christ; it was a new way to see, understand, and respond to the world; it was a different way to live in the world that required new behaviors from that of the Roman Empire. A relationship with Christ was inseparable from the institutional church because this new way of life could only be understood and lived within a Christian community. Christ's vision could not be sustained within the individual or transformative within society without the support of institutions.<sup>8</sup> As a result, consistent and active participation within the church took priority over all other forms of communal engagement and socialization.

The goal of active participation within the church was not for the growth and vitality of the institution itself. The purpose of consistently engaging with the church was to keep the new vision of Christ alive in the world, nourish the common life it required Christians to live, and carry forth the mission it called Christians to join.<sup>9</sup> To fulfill this purpose, the church sought to transform the lives of the individuals who regularly engaged with it, so they would be equipped to transform the society in which they lived and bring it closer to Christ's new vision for the world.<sup>10</sup>

According to Tim Shapiro and Kara Faris, the twenty-first-century church must be similarly defined by Christ's mission and highly contextualized by the needs of its surrounding community in order to form authentic Christian community.<sup>11</sup> Rather than emphasizing some of

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<sup>7</sup> C. Kavin Rowe, *Christianity's Surprise: A Sure and Certain Hope* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020), 55.

<sup>8</sup> Rowe, *Christianity's Surprise*, 80.

<sup>9</sup> Rowe, *Christianity's Surprise*, 60.

<sup>10</sup> Rowe, *Christianity's Surprise*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Shapiro and Kara Faris, *Divergent Church: The Bright Promise of Alternative Faith Communities* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 5.

the institutional measures that modern churches can fixate on today, such as denominational affiliation, style of worship, weekly attendance, properties, facilities, and budgets, the church must focus on joining Christ's restorative work that seeks to create human flourishing by fostering loving relationships with God, neighbor, and creation.

The institutional church was established to provide this kind of Christian community, which they believed was necessary for passing on the Christian faith. Maddix, Kim, and Estep contend that faith formation remains dependent on Christian community because religion is the result of the way individuals were socialized by adults who cared for them as children; thus, "the natural agency for communicating the Christian faith is a Christian community."<sup>12</sup> Their findings correlate with the studies that Christian educators David and Kathy Lynn highlight, which illustrate the need for a larger Christian community outside of the home for faith formation. Noting the findings of Roland Martinson in *The Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry*, the Lynns assert, "Kids need at least three Christian adults in their lives who practice a vibrant, vital faith to help them grow in their relationship with God."<sup>13</sup> Though these relationships between adults and children can be established in different contexts, the institutional church offers one of the most conducive environments for trusted, Christian relationships to form and grow by providing consistent, weekly access to Christian community.

### **The Relational Significance of the Church**

One of the most pivotal characteristics of the church for the process of faith formation is the accessibility it provides to intergenerational relationships. Roberto explains, "Integral to lifelong faith formation is the primacy of intergenerational community, relationships, and faith-forming experiences for developing and sustaining faith and discipleship in the people of all ages

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<sup>12</sup> Maddix, Kim, Estep, *Understanding Faith Formation*, 79.

<sup>13</sup> David and Kathy Lynn, *Home Grown Faith* (Nashville: World Publishing, 2006) 26.

and generations.”<sup>14</sup> This may be achieved by offering space for children and teenagers to lead worship with adults, enlisting adults to teach Sunday School or lead Bible study groups for children and teenagers, allowing teenagers to teach the adult Sunday School classes on occasion or lead a panel discussion with the adults on issues that teens face, as well as providing a place for all generations to join hands and pray, share their faith, and serve the poor and vulnerable together. Roberto describes the importance of these activities, asserting that “An intergenerational church culture forms and deepens Christian identity as people develop relationships and actively participate in faith communities that teach, model, and live the Christian tradition and way of life.”<sup>15</sup> Intergenerational relationships are central to identity development, and faith formation is ultimately about forming Christian identity.

According to Stephen Armet’s sociological study on the impact of religious communities and identity, “The relationship between socialization and identity formation has important implications for producing intrinsic and enduring values and commitment to an ideology in general, and a religious vision in particular.”<sup>16</sup> Though Armet’s findings suggest that the extent of a faith community’s impact on identity varies among adolescents depending on parenting styles, “the messages, doctrines, social networks, and family space that religious institutions provide reinforce attitudes, norms, and practices in the family.”<sup>17</sup> One of the central purposes of the institutional church is to provide a community of trusted, intergenerational relationships founded on shared beliefs, faith rituals, and life experiences.<sup>18</sup> These relationships are inseparable from faith formation because they are instrumental in forming Christian identity.

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<sup>14</sup> Roberto, *Lifelong Faith*, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Roberto, *Lifelong Faith*, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Armet, “Religious Socialization and Identity Formation of Adolescents in High Tension Religions,” (*Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 3, 2009), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25593742>, 277.

<sup>17</sup> Armet, “Religious Socialization,” 279.

<sup>18</sup> While the biblical vision of the church is to offer a community of believers who commit to love and care for each other as they live the Christian way of life and participate in Christ’s mission in the world together, the

## Catechesis and Faith Formation

One cannot examine the relationship between faith formation and the church without discussing the historically ecumenical method in which the church has passed on the basic teachings of the faith for centuries, which is the ancient practice of *catechesis*. The word *catechesis* means “teaching by word of mouth.”<sup>19</sup> It refers to Christian instruction in the fundamental teachings of Christ. Beginning in the first century with documents such as the *Didache*, the church provided new converts with instruction on the essential beliefs and practices of the Christian faith.<sup>20</sup> By the third century, the Church had formalized a period of basic training for those preparing for baptism that was called the “catechumenate.”<sup>21</sup>

According to the Catechesis Institute, for the first 300 years of the Christian faith, Christians made up a small minority of the population.<sup>22</sup> They lived and worked in rural

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reality for some is that the church has been a place of violence and abuse. Unfortunately, the institutional church has been plagued with the same enigmas as every other institution, which include but are not limited to, racism, sexism, classism, ageism, xenophobia, and religious discrimination. Rather than a place where fear and hatred are confronted and healed, the church has been a place for some where their prejudices have become more respectable and defensible. As a result, according to Howard Thurman, many have found more cause for hope in the secular world than within the relationships and community of the church. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976), 90.

<sup>19</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters: Instructions in The Basic Teaching of Christ* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 2.

<sup>20</sup> In his thesis, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation: Shaping Christian Community in the First Century and the Twenty-First Century*, David Brown provides a thorough examination of the history and significance of the *Didache* in the early church. With thoughtful scholarship and innovative application, Brown reimagines the reemergence of the *Didache's* instruction in the modern church. Defining its ancient ecclesial purpose, Brown explains: “Most likely composed in the second half of the first century . . . The *Didache* served as a training manual for gentile converts to Christianity, preparing them for life in Christian community. This brief document, roughly one third the length of Mark’s gospel, developed within an early Jewish-Christian community [nurturing] within potential converts a particular way of life, shaping and forming them into new creations ready for full inclusion in the Christian community.” David Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation: Shaping Christian Community in the First Century and the Twenty-First Century* (D.Min., The Divinity School at Duke University, 2016), 2-3, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> The Catechesis Institute defines itself as, “A research and teaching center dedicated to retrieving classical models of church-based education for a post-Christendom world. Rooted in the Anglican tradition, with an ecumenical scope, the Catechesis Institute provides resources, training, and networking for pastors, scholars, and teachers at any level.” Above all, their vision is the widespread renewal of the church through a retrieval of the ancient catechetical model of faith formation. Catechesis Institute, “Transforming Christian education and discipleship in the Church,” 2023. <https://www.catechesisrenewal.com/>.

communities within the Roman Empire, situated between their pagan friends, neighbors, and coworkers, as well as their Jewish neighbors with whom they had shared history and beliefs that both overlapped and collided, which created a complex relationship that was often confusing and contentious. From the beginning, these early Christ-followers recognized that there was a distinct difference in their beliefs and way of life compared to the culture in which they lived.<sup>23</sup> What's more, the way they understood the world—their place in it, their responsibility to it, and what God was doing in it—was either completely foreign to those in their society or theologically rejected. As they evangelized and brought some of their pagan neighbors and Jewish friends to Christ, they needed a method to introduce these new converts to the basic teachings of the faith. They needed a common structure that helped new believers learn to see and understand the world through a Christian lens. This change required learning a different type of language. The catechumenate gave the church a process to pass on this language to new Christians; a way to teach them how to speak as Christians so that they might learn how to live as Christians.<sup>24</sup>

### **Catechesis in the Early Church**

Though immediate baptism is the dominant form of baptism found in the New Testament, catechesis was often a process for candidates before and after baptism in the early church.<sup>25</sup>

Highlighting Philip Carrington's catechetical work, Robert Webber points to four basic

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<sup>23</sup> "What is a Catechumenate?" Catechesis Institute, edited from an earlier video created by Fr. Ryan Jones for Eucharist Church San Francisco, March 17, 2023, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSpqrXq-FWw&t=9s>.

<sup>24</sup> Curtis W. Freeman, *Pilgrim Journey: Instruction in the Mystery of the Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023), xiv.

<sup>25</sup> The Ethiopian eunuch is the most notable example of immediate baptism (Acts 8:26-40). Though he and Philip spent time in his chariot discussing the meaning of Isaiah, a passage Philip used to *proclaim to him the good news about Jesus*, the eunuch did not undergo a formal time of instruction before being baptized. According to the apostle Luke, after the eunuch asked, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip baptized him. Though this is one of the most familiar examples of immediate baptism, most baptisms recorded in the New Testament were immediate; they did not follow a formal time of learning the Christian faith prior to baptism. However, several New Testament passages imply a period of learning the new way of life baptism requires (Col. 3:8-4:12; Eph. 4:22-6:19; 1 Pet. 1:1-4:11; 1 Pet. 4:12-5:14; James 1:1-4:10) Robert E. Webber, *Journey to Jesus: The Worship, Evangelism, and Nurture Mission of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 95-97.

catechetical teachings in the New Testament that accompanied baptism: “*deponenter* (new Christians were taught to put off evil), *subjecti* (new Christians were taught to submit to God and each other), *vigilate* (new Christians were taught to watch and pray), and *resistite* (new Christians were taught to resist the devil).”<sup>26</sup> These four teachings for new converts do not appear to be a prerequisite for baptism in the first-century church, but they were essential lessons that new believers were taught as they turned from paganism to Christianity. Through early Christian writers such as Hippolytus, it is evident that by the third century, the church had begun to require a period of learning before candidates were able to enter the waters of baptism. Those in the first phase of discipleship were called *hearers*. They had graduated from the *seeker* phase and were now allowed to participate in the hearing of the Scripture and sermons in worship but were dismissed before the Eucharist. Only the *faithful*—baptized members of the church—were allowed to share in a time of prayer and Lord’s Supper to conclude the worship service. During this time, the *hearers* were receiving catechetical instruction in another room from a designated teacher.<sup>27</sup>

The catechumenate was required for a lot of early Christians. It was a lengthy process with well-defined stages and specific steps to continue in one’s journey toward Christ. The high level of commitment that faith formation required in the early church was one of the biggest draws for those outside the church. As Webber explains, “New Christianity spread rapidly because of the commitment expected of New Christians . . . commitment is energy . . . [and] when commitment levels are high, groups can undertake all levels of collective actions.”<sup>28</sup> And

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<sup>26</sup> Webber, *Journey to Jesus*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> Webber, *Journey to Jesus*, 97.

<sup>28</sup> This quote is originally adapted from Rodney Stark’s, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 3. Webber uses Stark’s work to summarize how Christianity was able to spread in the first few centuries from a tiny Jewish movement on the fringes of Roman society to the dominant religion of the modern Westernized world. Relying heavily on Stark’s research, Webber cites five characteristics of

yet, this commitment was not expected to be made alone. Early Christians formed a community around their shared commitment. Their commitment to a common belief, way of life, and vision bound them to one another while living among the pagan beliefs and practices of their culture. They were not simply committing to an institution or its programs; their commitment was to Christ and each other through the shared community and mission of the church.

### **Restoring Catechesis and Making Christians**

The catechesis model of faith formation was highly effective in the early church. It provided the church a structure to ensure it was accomplishing one of the most central questions of the church: “Are we forming faith?”<sup>29</sup> The primary task of the church is to ensure it is passing on the faith to future generations. In an era when the institution continues to decline in participation and cultural impact, and Christianity descends from the most dominant religious force in Western culture to a religion on the fringes of popular American society, there are many speculations about what has caused this decline and the solutions that could reverse it. According to the Catechesis Institute, one of the reasons for this decline is the failure of Christians and the church to impart the faith to the next generation. As an organization committed to Jesus and the importance of Christian faith formation, they believe a solution is found in restoring the catechumenate. “By mining the depths of the Christian tradition—by recovering what the church has long known about how to teach the faith—pastors, teachers, parents, and mentors can begin to create pockets of faithful Christian witness.”<sup>30</sup> Recovering the ancient art of catechesis

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the early church that allowed its evangelistic mission to thrive: personal contact, compassion, sanctity of life, high level of commitment, and its communal factor. Webber, *Journey to Jesus*, 61-63.

<sup>29</sup> Anderson and Hill, *Frogs without Legs*, 10.

<sup>30</sup> “What is a Catechumenate?,” Catechesis Institute, <https://www.catechesisrenewal.com/what-is-catechesis>.

provides the church with a formalized method for passing on the faith that was highly effective in the formation of early Christians.

The need for churches to return to the apostolic tradition of forming faith through intentional practices such as catechesis can also be heard in the words of one of the most notable third-century Christian leaders, Tertullian, who contended that Christians are made, not born.<sup>31</sup> These words are founded on Jesus's Great Commission: "Go therefore 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 that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). Through these instructions, Jesus revealed that disciples must be made, and in order to be made in the image of Christ they must be taught everything that Christ commanded. Thus, "for the church to be the church today, it must be committed to the practice of making Christians" by providing an intentional space and process for teaching and modeling everything Christ commanded.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Limits of the Church's Institutional Programs**

The process of making Christians requires giving less attention to buildings and budgets, and more consideration to the people and relationships inside and outside the institution. According to Anderson and Hill, "A common assumption made by nearly all [congregations and consultants] is that effective ministry has to do with the programs and activities of the local congregation. Primary attention rests on what takes place on the premises of the congregation."<sup>33</sup> This is the difference between the institutional measures of the church and the institutional church itself. Faith formation necessitates the institutional church; it is the institution that has historically provided the basic teachings and essential relationships needed to make Christians

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<sup>31</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, x.

<sup>32</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, x.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson and Hill, *Frogs without Legs*, 43.



whose lives are formed by their faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Unfortunately, the institutional measures of the church (i.e., programs, properties, and people) can focus more on making an institution than making disciples.

Making an institution can also be found in congregations that are overly busy with age-segregated programs that divide families into what is deemed as “age-appropriate” ministries. This practice not only isolates generations from each other but also perpetuates society’s practice of consistently keeping families busy and separated. Ruth Haley Barton describes how the church’s traditional programs affected her family and their desire to be together and experience Sabbath. Between separate Sunday School classes, committee meetings, youth group events, choir practices, and small group gatherings, which all took place on Sunday, it was almost impossible for her family to even share a meal on Sunday. She laments, “It is hard for me to put into words how discouraging this was, how defeating. . . . How I longed for a community of faith that would help us—by our very participation in it—to live into the rhythms [of Sabbath] that our hearts were longing for.”<sup>34</sup>

Barton emphasizes how the church’s current faith formation programs can perpetuate society’s busyness and fail to help families share faith practices with one another. Roberto echoes Barton’s concern for the impact of these age-segregated programs, which consistently prevent families from forming their faith together. He asserts, “Unfortunately, many congregations have contributed to [the decline in family religious practice and participation in the life of the congregation] by over-emphasizing age-segregated programming, which further divides families, and over-programming family members.”<sup>35</sup> One could certainly argue that

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<sup>34</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 116.

<sup>35</sup> Roberto, “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation,” 1.

families are also over-programming themselves outside of the church with all of the extracurricular activities that flood their calendars. In either case, the programs most families are involved with both inside and outside the church are typically age-segregated activities that send family members in different directions from one another. Rather than perpetuating this trend, the church must be a place where intergenerational activities are offered that bring families together and equip them for the work of faith formation outside the walls of the church.

### **The Limits of the Church's Educational Model**

One could argue that churches returning to the catechumenate are simply returning to an ancient program within the local congregation. However, as important as the catechumenate has been historically for faith formation in the church, this process was never meant to be confined to the church. As Freeman explains, "Learning the basic teaching of Christ is not something to be done in church on Sunday only. Instead, it is a practice meant to be part of conversations in the home every day of the week."<sup>36</sup> This is not just a modern view of catechesis. In Martin Luther's *Small Catechesis* produced in the early sixteenth century, he encouraged its usage in the home among families as much as in the church among pastor and congregation.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, the institutional measures that often over-emphasize programs have produced many Christians who have compartmentalized the work of faith formation to the church, believing it to be simply an education one receives by attending a class at church. One ecumenical example of this is the emergence of Sunday School. Freeman affirms, "As Christian education replaced Christian formation, developmental psychology superseded baptismal theology. The aim of Sunday School was not preparation for baptism and discipleship, but rather the presentation of age-appropriate

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<sup>36</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, 5.

educational material, with the goal of gradual conversion to the faith.”<sup>38</sup> Christian education is a part of faith formation but cannot be a replacement for the long work of discipleship. Learning about Jesus is not the same as knowing Jesus. In its proper place, Christian education prepares us to be ready for an encounter with Christ. As we encounter him, we grow to know him; the more we know him, the more we are shaped by his image and formed by his purposes.

When faith formation becomes limited to Christian education, then faith itself is reduced to an exercise of the mind. Describing the impact of an education-focused model of faith formation as an adolescent, one Catholic priest describes, “The impression we got from all of this was that faith was something one did with the mind or intellect. It was an act by which one accepted as true certain propositions or doctrines far too deep and mysterious for the very limited human mind to understand.”<sup>39</sup> Though accepting the teachings of Christ as true is foundational for faith formation, the Christian faith is far more than what we think about Jesus of Nazareth. Faith is developing a deep trust in God’s nearness; it is choosing to be attentive to God’s presence and intentional in reorienting our lives around God’s purposes.

Freeman explains how faith reorients our worldview: “Faith is neither blind certainty based on the facts nor a blind leap into the dark. Faith is more of a way of seeing, compelled not by the confidence that we understand but by the conviction that we desire what lies ahead.”<sup>40</sup> As the author of Hebrews declares, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Education helps us to gain knowledge that forms our convictions based on what we know; faith is a conviction based on what we do not fully know yet choose to

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<sup>38</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Journey*, x.

<sup>39</sup> Aidan Ryan, “Faith in the Future,” (*The Furrow* 70, no. 4, 2019), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45210214>, 229.

<sup>40</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Journey*, 22.

believe. Rather than pursuing knowledge to enlighten the mind, “faith is a journey of seeking to know God.”<sup>41</sup>

### **The Limits of Maintaining an Institution**

If faith is a different way of seeing and responding to the world based on the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus, then faith formation must be more than what we learn, understand, and know about God. Faith is also about mission, participating in the ministry of Jesus whose mission is the kingdom of God. In the westernized American culture, one’s mission is largely focused on oneself. The American dream is often fueled by consumerism and achievement based on the promises of prosperity in a free market where “anything is possible.” When coupled with pride and ego, it becomes a life driven by comparison and competition; a life defined by accomplishment and accumulation. When the self is at the center of our being and doing, when our mission is ultimately about us, then according to Brené Brown, our *modus operandi* is often one of “pretending, performing, pleasing, and perfecting.”<sup>42</sup> We make decisions based on self-protection and self-promotion; we want to protect what we have and promote who we are. Mulholland argues that this is the nature of the false self; it is a self-referenced way of being that places us at the center of our lives and world, and promotes our agenda above all else.<sup>43</sup>

The institutional measures of the church can create this kind of self-referenced way of being for the church itself. Rather than a mission found in the person and message of Jesus, churches can become overly focused on maintaining the ministries of their institution. Instead of the church being “a means to facilitate an encounter between the Risen Lord and his disciples,”

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<sup>41</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Journey*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (New York: Random House, 2018), 74.

<sup>43</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 39.

maintenance views the church as an end in itself.<sup>44</sup> This emphasis is not how the early church was able to grow and thrive under the Roman Empire. The early church spread because its mission was bigger than itself. During the devastating epidemics of the first few centuries, the pagans fled these outbreaks and cared mostly for themselves. The Christians responded very differently. As Webber supports, “[they] reached out in loving help to care for the sick and the needy.”<sup>45</sup> Citing Daniel Ruff, Gary Ferngren agrees that “it is against the backdrop of widespread epidemics, which began in the second century, that Christian discourse of suffering and philanthropy developed.”<sup>46</sup>

### **God’s Mission over Institutional Maintenance**

At that time, the sick did not have the societal resources offered today. There were no hospitals or orphanages; those were later Christian inventions.<sup>47</sup> Similar to today, the wealthy had the greatest access to healthcare services. As K. C. Richardson explains, the majority of the Mediterranean world functioned on a basic sustenance level.<sup>48</sup> Most families were one step above poverty. One small dip in income in an urban setting or a bad harvest in a rural setting, and families were in desperate need of assistance. Without access to adequate healthcare, contracting a virus or disease for most of the population not only could lead to a medical emergency but could also push the family over the sustenance line and into poverty in a relatively short period of time.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the plagues of the second century that swept across

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<sup>44</sup> Ryan, “Faith in the Future,” 233.

<sup>45</sup> Webber, *Journey to Jesus*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care In Early Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>47</sup> Rowe, *Christianity’s Surprise*, 76.

<sup>48</sup> K. C. Richardson, *Early Christian Care for the Poor: An Alternative Subsistence Strategy under Roman Imperial Rule* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Richardson, *Early Christian Care for the Poor*, 4.

the Roman Empire, poverty and displacement due to disease and death became a harsh reality for many families.

Contrary to popular belief, Ferngren argues that early Christians viewed sickness and disease as a natural part of being human rather than an outcome caused only by sin and demons.<sup>50</sup> In response, they believed human medical treatments were needed in accordance with divine intervention.<sup>51</sup> Human action was not viewed separately from divine action; there was no dichotomy between the two. They believed God's supernatural intervention often came through human interaction and engagement. God was not working outside of humanity; God was healing diseases and curing the sick through the knowledge and practices of humanity. Rather than holding God solely responsible for miraculous healings, early Christians believed it was their responsibility to care for the sick.<sup>52</sup>

The obligation early Christians felt for those who were sick, diseased, and dying was founded on their understanding of the *imago Dei*. Ferngren explains, "The nature of Yahweh was not represented by pictorial images but by the human race. Humans alone could be called the image of Yahweh because in their nature and being, they reflected their Creator."<sup>53</sup> This belief placed an intrinsic value on human life that was not shared by the broader Graeco-Roman society. Thus, when the plagues of the second century spread throughout the Roman Empire, Christians believed that turning one's back on the sick and dying was the same as turning one's back on God. In response, while many were fleeing their homes and cities to distance themselves from the sick and preserve their own lives, Christians stayed and tended to the sick. They believed their Christian faith "insisted that love of God required the spontaneous manifestation

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<sup>50</sup> Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care*, 48.

<sup>51</sup> Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care*, 85.

<sup>52</sup> Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care*, 104.

<sup>53</sup> Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care*, 97.

of personal charity toward one's brothers: one could not claim to love God without loving his brother."<sup>54</sup>

### **From Inwardly Focused to Socially Focused**

It was God's mission of redemption and restoration that formed the identity and shaped the purposes of early Christians. It was this mission, formalized through the institutional church, that led the church forward and allowed it to thrive amid a pagan culture. The church was a means to an end; a community committed to being conformed to Christ by participating in his ministry in the world. This element of faith formation is what Noel Castellanos calls *incarnational*.<sup>55</sup> Rather than concentrating on better educational programs within the church that can easily become inwardly focused and performance-driven, the church must be more socially active and engaged with its neighbors. Castellanos explains, "We must expand our current paradigm of gospel-centered ministry to make certain that it puts millions of people surviving on the fringes of our world at the center of our concern, because the margins are at the center of God's concern."<sup>56</sup> Rather than striving toward its own institutional measures, the church must focus on God's mission to the least, last, and lost.

According to Peter Storey, the former head of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and a prominent anti-apartheid leader, one of the signs that people are getting closer to God is when they get closer to each other. He states, "Ever since a young Jew was nailed to a cross, we have effectively become nailed to our neighbors."<sup>57</sup> This is evidenced in the final chapters of the book of Isaiah when the prophet addressed a postexilic people following their anticlimactic

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<sup>54</sup> Ferngren, *Medicine & Health Care*, 99.

<sup>55</sup> Noel Castellanos, *Where the Cross Meets the Streets: What Happens to the Neighborhood When God is at the Center* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 79.

<sup>56</sup> Castellanos, *Where the Cross Meets the Streets*, 17.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Storey, "Who on Earth Are These People?," sermon from Duke Chapel on All Saint's Day, November 2, 2014, video, 42:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vrs8vPfCjA>.

return to Judah. Despite their personal commitment to the spiritual disciplines of the Torah, God had not restored their home into the flourishing faith community it once was. The city of David and its temple were in ruin, a shell of what they were.<sup>58</sup> In response, the people expressed their confusion with God and a deep desire for his deliverance. Through Isaiah, God offered clear expectations for his people that the church may need to hear today (Isaiah 58:3-6). Judah would eventually be restored; their temple would be rebuilt; and their community would thrive once again. However, they had to first turn their attention from themselves to the needs of their neighbors; they had to become restorative people in order to be restored.

Storey describes this as the difference between being broken and broken open. “Being broken is about the deep damage that we call carry; it is as old as the human condition. Being broken open is about being healed; it is the precondition of something new happening in our lives.”<sup>59</sup> The church’s model of faith formation must be about more than individual development and personal salvation. That is a “half-gospel.”<sup>60</sup> The church must be *broken open* from an inwardly focused endeavor to one that is also socially focused in order to embrace the whole gospel of Christ.

## Conclusion

The institutional church is indispensable in helping the body of believers cultivate their faith. While dependent on the influence of the church, faith formation is also impacted by what is taught in the home. Both are essential to one’s spiritual growth, and each has a specific role in

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<sup>58</sup> The miserable living conditions of early Persian rule are referenced by other biblical prophets, including Hag 1:6, 9–11; 2:16–19; Zech 8:10; Neh 5:1–5. These conditions, characterized by droughts, bad harvests, lack of employment, inflation, and social unrest, were the catalysts for the communal laments and complaints of the temple liturgy during the Second Temple period. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66, Volume 19B: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 177-178.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Storey, “Who on Earth Are These People?,” video, 48:35.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Storey, *Protest at Midnight: Ministry to a Nation Torn Apart* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022), 79.



the development of the Christian faith. To prove that loving neighbor is how we show our love for God, the church must continue to be a catalyst for believers to encounter Christ by engaging with others. Equally important, scholarly insights support a change in the role of the church for faith formation, transitioning to a partnership with families. Knowing how successfully the practice of catechesis in the early church converted new believers to the Christian faith, churches willing to restore this ancient practice and expand it to the home might better engage families with the community of the church and equip parents to pass on the faith to their children.

## Chapter Two: Faith Formation and the Home

### Introduction

Who forms whom? In the biblical story, God’s people are always being formed both directly and indirectly, intentionally and unintentionally, for better and for worse. As Earley contends, “The human heart is never *not* being shaped by something. The human heart is not a car: *there is no neutral.*”<sup>1</sup> Paul points to this reality in his letter to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). Whether *conformed* by this world or *transformed* by God, Paul indicates that our formation is ongoing, though it is likely a both/and process rather than an either/or binary dynamic. Humans (as well as all living creatures) are constantly shaped by their environment. As Christians, the question is not whether we are being formed by this world; we are. The point is how intentional we are in actively inviting God’s Spirit into our formation and allowing God’s presence to guide the process.

Though every environment or experience has some degree of influence, David and Kathy Lynn note that *the home remains the primary influence of faith and values.*<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will explore the influence of the home on faith formation. Through a sociological and theological lens, I will argue that parents must become the spiritual leaders of their households for their homes to actually be shaped by their faith in Christ. As some studies reveal, parents may not get the religious engagement and faith development they desire from their teens, but the religiosity

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<sup>1</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 95.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn, *Home Grown Faith*, 7.

of most teens is a reflection of the religiosity of their parents.<sup>3</sup> Parents have a far greater influence on the faith of their children than a church community alone. The home provides a space where parents spend significant time with their children. Whether or not parents are intentional with their time at home, their influence will be a major factor in the relationship their children and teenagers have with their faith in adulthood.

However, the impact of the home on faith formation is not exclusive to children. I will also argue that the rhythms and patterns of the home ultimately determine the faith development and growth (or lack thereof) of everyone in the household—adults and adolescents, alike. Similar to the institutional church, the home has the potential to make or break disciples. Just as the church’s current model of faith formation is limited, I will also examine the limitations of the home’s influence on faith. Acknowledging the strong influence of the home and the church, as well as their limitations on faith formation, it seems clear that an ongoing collaborative effort is critical. Thus, I will advocate for a stronger partnership between the two to develop faith.

### **A Biblical Understanding of Home**

The term *home* conveys a variety of definitions and connotations. In Scripture there is a strong connection between God’s presence and home; this connection is less about particular places of residence or the people with whom one lives, and more about the places within the individual where God dwells.<sup>4</sup> And yet, to understand God’s presence abiding within and among his people, the story of God’s relationship with a certain group of people whom he led to a particular place is central. For the Israelites, their understanding of home was encapsulated in generations of people who descended from Abraham and Sarah. Though central, Abraham and

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley J. Wigger, *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing our Children in Love and Grace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 24.

Sarah could not be separated from Adam and Eve who were the first people with whom God made a home on earth.<sup>5</sup> For the ancients, home was far bigger than the people with whom they lived under one roof; home was a much wider family of ancestors and descendants whom God had chosen as God's people.

And yet, the wider community of God's covenantal people that spanned generations was also fundamentally connected to a place—Canaan. Central to the Old Testament narrative is the journey of God's people to, in, from, and back to Canaan: the battles and wars they fought to win it; the establishment of their kingdom in it; their successes, failures, and eventual loss of it; their scattering and exile from it; and ultimately their return to it. God's home with God's people is uniquely joined to a place—the land *flowing with milk and honey* that God promised. Though the primacy of Canaan was inseparable from their understanding of home, the Genesis story expands the imagination of God's people to a place far bigger than the Garden of Eden and greater than the land of Canaan. It is the heavens and the earth that God created “in the beginning” as a place in space and time for all of creation to live with God.<sup>6</sup>

The biblical narrative of God's story with a particular people in a specific place consistently follows a pattern of Place-Displacement-Home. In the Old Testament, this theme begins with Creation-Flood-Canaan, repeats with Canaan-Slavery-Kingdom, and again with Kingdom-Exile-Return.<sup>7</sup> In the New Testament, the ultimate example of this pattern is embodied in Jesus's Birth-Death-Resurrection.<sup>8</sup> In each example, God's presence resides with his people in a specific place, the place is lost for a time, and then ultimately restored and reestablished. The Apostle John affirms the significance of God's place with God's people in his Revelation: “Then

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<sup>5</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 49.

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and be their God’” (Rev 21:1-3). In John’s vision, God’s home (heaven) will one day be reunited with the home of mortals (earth); for now, humanity remains displaced in a broken world. The promise of Scripture, however, is that one day God’s people will be reconciled to God and live in a restored place with God, as the New Jerusalem descends and becomes our new forever home.

Though Scripture associates certain people and places with home, a primary message woven throughout the biblical narrative is that humanity is only truly at home when we are in the presence of God. Thankfully, Scripture assures us that wherever we are and with whomever we are, the presence of God is there. As the psalmist declares, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there” (Ps 139:7-8). The prophet Jeremiah echoes a similar understanding of God’s omnipresence within all creation: “‘Am I a God nearby, says the LORD, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?’ says the LORD. ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ says the LORD” (Jer 23:23-24). Despite God’s nearness to all people in all places, the extent to which humanity experiences God’s nearness and ultimately finds its home with God depends on our acknowledgment of God’s presence and commitment to know him. As is possible (and in some cases common) for people to share the same space without ever really knowing each other, the same is true for humanity and God—knowing God and sharing the same space with God are not the same. Similar to working alongside someone for years and never

really knowing them, we can live alongside God and never know God. If home is more than the place where one lives and the people who live there, but the larger network of trusted relationships in our lives, then home for Christians cannot be separated from an intentional pursuit to know God through a trusted relationship with God.<sup>9</sup>

### **A Biblical Understanding of Family**

Along with *home*, Scripture also expands our understanding of *family*. Jesus extended his followers' notion of family with his response to the one who told him that his mother and brothers were waiting to talk with him while he was speaking to the crowds. He replied, “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matt 12:48b-50). Paul echoes this view of family as he writes to the church in Ephesus, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). In both the salutations and valedictions of his epistles, Paul commonly refers to fellow disciples as “brothers and sisters in Christ.”<sup>10</sup> Though the familial language in the first century was often used among the Judeo-Christian community, following Peter’s vision at Simon the Tanner’s home and the subsequent conversion of Cornelius and his household,<sup>11</sup> *brothers and sisters in Christ* became widely used in the church for all Christians, both Jews and Gentiles.

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson and Hill, *Frog without Legs*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cencreae” (Rom 16:1). Though Phoebe is one of the few women who Paul addresses specifically as “sister,” the NSRV translates the Greek word *adelphoi* as “brothers and sisters,” rather than simply “brethren,” which is found in translations such as the KJV and ASV. Though *adelphoi* is masculine, Paul’s use of plural pronouncements alongside this term connotes that he is addressing the whole church, which includes both women and men. As such, the NRSV and many other translations such as the CSB, CEB, ERV, NASB, and NIV include “brothers and sisters” in Paul’s address to the churches in both the salutations and valedictions of his letters.

<sup>11</sup> This story is recorded in Acts in both Chapters 10 and 11. Defending his baptism of the Gentiles before the Jerusalem Church, Peter declared, “‘If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the

It is also important to note the significance of the Christian understanding of eternity as it relates to the *home* and *family* of God. Songwriter Richard Gillard captures this notion in the words he wrote for *The Servant Song*: “We are pilgrims on a journey. We are brothers on the road. We are here to help each other, walk the mile and bear the load.” Since the church’s inception, Christians have understood themselves as *pilgrims* in this world *on a journey* with fellow believers, making our way home to heaven where we will live together in the eternal kingdom of God with the family of God. Jesus promised this place to his disciples when he assured them: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:1-3).

Along with promising his disciples that one day they would be with him, Jesus reassured them of a “dwelling place” with his Father that was prepared for them. Paul echoes these words to the Corinthians: “For we know that, if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor 5:1). The “earthly tent” he refers to is the body, which he describes as a temporary place that is *afflicted, persecuted, and struck down* in this life (2 Cor 4:8-9); the “house in the heavens” is the Kingdom of God to which fellow believers are making their way and will one day live together with God and each other. As Paul explains, it is the city that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob hoped and anticipated, whose architect and builder is God (Heb 11:10). The earliest Christians understood this world as a temporary place of residence; their home was with Christ and all the saints—

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Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:17-18).

“brothers and sisters in Christ”—in the eternal Kingdom of God. The hope of an eternal *home* with God was intricately woven with the promise of an eternal reunion with the *family* of God.

### **Home: The Place and People with Whom One Lives**

Though the Bible expands our understanding of both *home* and *family*, we cannot overlook the influence of our place of residence and the people and relationships that abide in that place. While the definitions of *home* and *family* are multifaceted, my thesis will focus on *home* as our place of residence and *family* as the people who live with us in that space.

According to Clydesdale, it is this particular *home* and *family* that have the greatest influence on faith, for “children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”<sup>12</sup> As his research indicates for teens after their first year out following high school graduation, the frequency in which teens attend religious services may decline, but many continue to affirm the religious identities they formed within the context of the family with whom they lived and were raised.<sup>13</sup> This impact can be seen clearly during what he calls the “launching period,” which is the transition period for teens and parents following high school graduation. Though the dynamics of many American families change considerably during this period, the influence of the family sets the trajectory of a teen’s ability (or lack thereof) to launch. He argues, “Trajectories are established long before the senior year of high school, and the launching period is but the ritualized enactment of the trajectory.”<sup>14</sup> The rhythms of the home have a significant impact on the trajectory of most teens, which includes both intentional planning and unconscious patterns within families.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This quote is originally adapted from James Baldwin’s *Nobody Knows My Name*. Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 53.

<sup>15</sup> Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 54.



## Faith Formation in the Home and Identity Development

One of the most important questions that every person seeks to answer throughout their lives (especially during their adolescent years) is, “Who am I?” Referencing the work of Henri Nouwen from a retreat they attended, Clark and Powell present the three statements through which most define who they are: “I am what I do. I am what I control. I am what others say about me.”<sup>16</sup> They explain that even though these responses are inadequate (and can be destructive) to *who we are*, many adolescents and adults understand themselves based on these statements. As a result, their self-worth often comes through performance-driven metrics and a deep desire for admiration and acceptance.<sup>17</sup> Performance-driven metrics lead to a false self, which is often motivated by fear, a desire for self-preservation, a craving to possess and protect, and an attitude of self-promotion and manipulation.<sup>18</sup> For many, the behaviors that accompany the false self are often subtle and subconscious. Our intent may not be to control, self-promote, or manipulate others to achieve our desired outcomes, but when our identity is found in anything outside of loving union with God then these behaviors are often inevitable because the outcomes we develop for ourselves are usually self-focused.

This phenomenon can be explained through those who ground their identity in *what they do*. Whether it is as a husband or wife, father or mother, daughter or son, employer or employee, white collar or blue collar, student or professional, social or antisocial, cultural or countercultural—these labels are not inherently bad, but they were never meant to bear the weight of our identity. Each of these actions was simply intended to be one of the places where our true self incarnates within the created order.<sup>19</sup> However, when these activities—*what we*

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<sup>16</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 31.

*do*—become the framework of our identity, then they too become self-guided and self-focused. As a result, we may perform well, possess abundantly, and successfully fulfill the purposes we have determined for ourselves, but when the roots of our identity are sunk into anything other than God, then it can be easy for our lives to become fragmented.<sup>20</sup>

According to Mulholland, “The temptation to take over God’s role in our life is the essence of the false self . . . a mode of being that creates its own structures of identity, meaning, value, and purpose; a mode of being that determines for itself the nature of its own being.”<sup>21</sup> The importance of identity can be discussed through the story of Moses. Moses found his calling and purpose by first discovering *who he was* in God. In her own words, Ruth Haley Barton articulates God’s message to Moses at the burning bush: “I know the question of your identity has always been a little confusing for you, but I have always known who you are. . . . Now that you know who you are, I am calling you to do something out of the essence of your being.”<sup>22</sup> We cannot escape who we are. As those created in the *imago Dei*, it is out of the depths of our identity that our purpose is found.

If one’s identity and relationship with God are intricately woven together such that our union with God was always meant to be the matrix of being through which our identity is formed, then the importance of faith formation in the home is undeniable considering the environment of the home is central to identity development. The family is one of the most significant realities that shape our lives because there is little else that demands as much of us as our family.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not we feel close to those in our home, a deep love and connection

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<sup>20</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 144-145.

<sup>21</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership: Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 71.

<sup>23</sup> Bairbre Cahill, “Family Spirituality,” *The Furrow* 62, no. 12 (2011): 676, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41342364>.

between them or detached and disengaged, the environment of the home forms our identity because in and through the home we develop the patterns of our lives. This reality can be compared to wagon wheels in a rut.<sup>24</sup> Our homes develop our habits, and our habits direct our lives, just as a rut guides a set of wagon wheels in a particular direction toward a destination.

When visiting Israel years ago, I was struck by the ruts in the cobblestone roads of first-century Roman excavations. Inside the ruts, the road was smooth. The consistent weight and friction of ancient chariots and wagons had worn a flat, level surface atop uneven stone. Within these ruts, the trip was likely smoother and easier than the rough, bumpy road outside the ruts where the stones remained uneven. Each set of ruts led in a certain direction. Some paths were curved and some straight. The wagon wheels that stayed in these ruts likely led to a specific destination without much effort or intentionality. Staying in a rut is easy, but getting wagon wheels out of one takes considerable effort.

The same is true for the patterns and rhythms of our lives. Our habits develop our patterns, and our patterns create certain day-to-day ruts (some good and some bad) that we follow. The ruts we consistently utilize are often what we consider to be *normal*, and one of the most significant things about any household is the development of what is accepted as normal.<sup>25</sup> What we believe is normal determines how we live, and how we live (the ruts we follow) determines who we become (the destination). If faith formation is about developing a Christian identity by finding *who we are* in Christ, and the rhythms and relationships of the home set the patterns that greatly influence who we become, then I propose faith formation must become a centralized and prioritized focus of the home so that faith may have its full effect on us through intentional practices in the home (James 2:21-22).

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<sup>24</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 4.

## Faith Formation in the Home and the Shema

The authors of the Torah not only understood the importance of faith formation practices becoming a consistent part of the daily rhythms of life both inside and outside the home, they also commanded it. They believed obedience to God’s law in all places and at all times was the only way the people of Israel could ensure their future in Canaan. While gathered on the banks of the Jordan, on the plains of Moab across from Jericho, Moses delivered his final speech to the Israelites before passing the torch of his leadership to Joshua who would ultimately lead the people into the Promised Land. Deuteronomy, which means “repetition of the law,” is the record of Moses’s final words and instructions to God’s people to ensure their success in Canaan. Though characterized by what many scholars refer to as the *Deuteronomistic Theology*—the promise of blessings for the faithful and curses for the unfaithful—Moses’s final words were an attempt to ensure the new generation did not forget or forsake God’s law as did some of their ancestors in the wilderness.<sup>26</sup> After repeating the Ten Commandments in the preceding chapter, chapter six opens with Moses’s reassertion that obedience to God’s law is the only way God’s people can receive all that is promised after crossing the Jordan: “Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe [the commandments] diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deut 6:3a).

Following this preface, Moses offers a clear set of instructions for how God’s commandments are to be followed in a passage known as the Shema:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them

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<sup>26</sup> Ronald E. Clements, “The Book of Deuteronomy,” in *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1998), 2:273.

as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut 6:4-9).

This text became an ancient Jewish prayer and continues to be the centerpiece of morning and evening prayers for Jews today. For Christians, the significance of this passage is amplified through Jesus's Great Commandment as recorded in the New Testament, which begins with Moses's words to Israel to *love the Lord your God with all your heart and with your soul and with your might* (Matt 22:35-40). For Moses, the threat of those who were already occupying the land across the Jordan that the Israelites sought to possess was secondary to the more immediate and prolonged danger for his people, which was the temptation to forsake their covenant with God by failing to follow the commandments of God.<sup>27</sup> To prevent this possibility from becoming a reality, Moses tells them what to do with the law that he has given them. First, they must "hear" and "obey" his instructions, which he urges through the opening directive, *Shema*. The ancients understood hearing as more than the physiological process of sound entering the ear canal and being recognized and interpreted by the brain; hearing meant obeying.

The first and most important command Moses called Israel to hear and obey was to *love* God, which, according to Clement, "from this point onward, becomes a central aspect of the entire biblical tradition, shaping much of Jewish and Christian spirituality that has been built upon it."<sup>28</sup> Moses defines this love as more than a mental or emotive exercise, but one that must embrace the whole of our being, both conscious and subconscious, through self-discipline.<sup>29</sup> Moses employs a series of commands to describe what loving God will require: *keep, recite, bind, fix, and write*. The shared theme of these directives is that God's law must be internalized

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<sup>27</sup> Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy," 342.

<sup>28</sup> Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy," 343.

<sup>29</sup> Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-21:9, Volume 6A: Second Edition*, The Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 143.

and externalized by every member of God's people in all aspects of their lives, both individually and collectively. Rather than an attempt to simply control behavior through stringent legalism, Moses echoes the Abrahamic covenant, which made no distinction between loving God and obeying God. Jesus reiterates this understanding of humanity's relationship to God in a clear declaration to his disciples: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). To love God is to obey God, and to obey God is to love God.

Moses believed loving God by *keeping* God's commandments in our hearts was more than one's personal responsibility to oneself. This required passing on the faith to future generations by *reciting* the law and commandments to children, which necessitated *talking* about them at home and on the road, at all times of the day. Though the authors of the Torah lived more than three millennia ago, their record of Moses's charge to Israel supports a 2001-2005 study conducted by The National Study of Youth and Religion, which shows "clear evidence that the single most important influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents."<sup>30</sup> And according to a study of more than 10,000 parents conducted by the Search Institute in 1984, the more religion is important to parents and part of the rhythms of the home, the more kids trust their parents in other important matters. Whether Catholic, Protestant, or no denominational affiliation, the parents in this study who reported that their religion was important to them and incorporated its practices as a regular part of their household found that their children were more likely to select them to talk about a problem over their peers, teachers, coaches, or anyone else in their lives.<sup>31</sup>

Prior to offering his final blessings to the tribes of Israel before ascending to the top of Mt Pisgah where he would ultimately die, Moses addressed all the people of Israel one last time.

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<sup>30</sup> Lynn, *Home Grown Faith*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Lynn, *Home Grown Faith*, 8.

Once again, he reiterated their responsibility at home: “Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you but rather your very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess” (Deut 32:46-47). It was not enough for the people of Israel to *diligently observe* the law; obedience required teaching it to their children to ensure God’s covenant with Israel would remain for all future generations. But passing on the faith could not be done haphazardly; it would not be accomplished organically. It was going to require the intentional effort of the community to teach the commandments to their children by consistently talking about them in their homes.

Paul shared Moses’s conviction that what is *talked about* is a significant part of passing on the faith. In Chapter 10 of his letter to Christians living in Rome, the apostle emphasizes foundational truths believers must recognize. First, that Christ offers salvation to all who proclaim his name: “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10:13). Also, Paul wanted Jewish believers to understand that salvation came through faith and not the law. Thus, whether Gentile believers followed certain tenets of the Mosaic Law through circumcision and dietary restrictions was inconsequential. Salvation was dependent upon a single criterion—*calling on the name of the Lord*.

With these truths established he asks, “How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (Rom 10:14). Just as Moses reminded the people of Israel that in order for God’s law to be passed on to future generations it must be *recited* and *talked about* at all times and in all places, Paul’s words also magnify the importance

of what is *talked about* and *heard* in passing on the faith. If parents have the most significant influence on the religious lives of adolescents and the patterns of the home affect who they become, then for future generations to *profess* Christ and be *formed* by Christ, they must consistently *hear* about him through the teachings and example of their parents in their home.

What adults teach their children not only reveals what is being passed down to future generations, but also what is most important to the adults. The reason God instructed Moses to say to Israel “Keep these words that I am commanding you” and “Recite them to your children” is because the best way to understand what a group of people really believes is to learn the stories they are teaching their children.<sup>32</sup> Moses wanted to be sure the Israelites were consistently teaching their children the story of God and God’s covenantal people not only for the sake of future generations, but also because of the ways in which these stories would shape the values and priorities of the community itself. The stories that would have the greatest impact would not only be the stories they told during communal gatherings and corporate worship, but specifically the ones that were told consistently to their children at home and on the road, when they got up in the morning and when they went to bed in the evening. The evidence that God’s covenant-relationship was truly in the hearts of his people would be their obedience to God’s law. And one of the most important indicators of the people’s obedience to the law would be whether they were teaching it to their children in the home.

In light of Moses’s instructions, twenty-first-century Christian families must consider the stories that are being consistently shared in their homes today. What stories are being told? Who

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has To Say To Today’s Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Publishing, 2008), 70.



is telling these stories? Speaking of middle-to-upper-class American families, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove laments, “With a TV in the living room, the bedroom, and increasingly in the car, kids hear the stories that advertisers sell them when they sit at home and when they’re on the road, when they lie down and when they get up.”<sup>33</sup> Since Wilson-Hartgrove’s publication, I would add that tablets, smartphones, video games, and social media are as accessible and formative (if not more so) for American families as the TV was in previous decades. As a result, rather than the biblical story of God’s love and faithfulness shaping American families, these devices are often determining and limiting the stories of many households.

### **The Limits of Faith Formation in the Home**

Though faith formation in the home is essential for shaping the values and priorities of families around Christ, the home has just as many limitations as the institutional church in telling God’s story and passing on the faith to future generations. According to Clydesdale, one of the most prominent stories told in many American households is something he calls the “popular American moral culture.” Formed and rooted in American art, folklore, entertainment, and social history, Clydesdale defines *popular American moral culture* as one that “celebrates personal initiative and achievement; demonstrates patriotism; believes in God and a spiritual afterlife; lauds loyalty to family, friends, coworkers; expects personal moral freedom; distrusts large organizations and political processes; and, increasingly, defines happiness and fulfillment as accomplishments found primarily in personal relationships and individual consumption.”<sup>34</sup> Clydesdale does not believe that American families are the only teachers of this prevailing culture, but they are its primary facilitators. Due to the prevalence of this story in many Westernized homes, the biblical account of God’s story of redemption and restoration through

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<sup>33</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 71.

<sup>34</sup> Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 55.

Christ is limited to a performance-based Christianity focused on personal happiness and individual achievement.

Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton refer to this form of Christianity as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD is not its own religion or a specific form of Christianity. It is a label these sociologists developed to summarize the results of their 2005 study of the religiosity of American teens. Shared among Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and even nonreligious deists, MTD “cannot sustain its own integral, independent life; rather it must attach itself like incubus to established historical religious traditions, feeding on their doctrines and sensibilities, and expanding by mutating their theological substance to resemble its own distinctive image.”<sup>35</sup> Smith and Denton argue that MTD is rooted in American individualism, which treats religion as a tool to help individuals be and do what they want and hope to achieve, rather than an external authority or divinity that makes compelling claims and hard demands on their lives to grow in ways they do not want or desire.<sup>36</sup> From a Christian perspective, MTD emphasizes Jesus’s claim that he came “so that [we] might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10), while ignoring his demand that those who wish to be his disciples “must pick up their cross and follow [him]” (Matt 16:24). The high cost of discipleship proclaimed by a God who declared “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect” is replaced by a cosmic therapist who is not particularly involved in one’s personal affairs, but instead helps us in times of trouble, wants us to be a kind and moral people, and ultimately works to ensure that we live a good and happy life.<sup>37</sup> This view of Christianity where adherents attempt to be good so that God will help them live a happy life can easily lead to what philosopher Dallas Willard coined, “the gospel of

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<sup>35</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 166.

<sup>36</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 147-148.

<sup>37</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163-164.

sin management.”<sup>38</sup> Rather than seeking to enter into a life-transforming relationship with Christ that forms the matrix of our being, the *gospel of sin management* reduces Scripture to a manual for how to deal with sin so that God will reward us with happiness and prosperity rather than pain and suffering.

Similar to Clydesdale, Smith and Denton (as well as Powell and Clark) conclude that for the vast majority of teens in America, regardless of age, sex, race, or other factors, their religiosity is a reflection of what they were raised to believe; most are content to adopt and follow the faith of their parents; “their answer to many questions about the main religious influences in their lives most often are ‘Just my parents,’ ‘Parents and church,’ ‘My parents, actually’ and ‘I guess my family.’”<sup>39</sup> Though their study revealed a small minority of teens who rejected the faith of their parents due to their parent’s hypocrisy (i.e., failing to practice what their religion proclaims) or over-religiosity (e.g., putting religious practices above everything and everyone else), the overwhelming majority of American teens were confident and content to follow the religious beliefs and practices of their parents.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the instrumental and transactional approach of MTD within religion was not invented by teenagers; it is a dominating image of religion by most of the religious adults in the United States. Smith and Denton argue, “Our religious conventional adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously as what the adult world is routinely modeling for and inculcating in its youth.”<sup>41</sup>

For the most part, our kids are mirrors of our attitudes and beliefs.<sup>42</sup> If there is a religious epidemic among our youth, then it is safe to assume there is also one infecting adults. Like flight

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<sup>38</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 123.

<sup>41</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 166.

<sup>42</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 34.

attendants who, during the opening safety instructions on each flight, tell the adults to put on their oxygen masks first to ensure they are able to assist their children, Christian adults need the instruction and community of the church to ensure they are able to help their children. If adults are spiritually suffocating, then so too will most of the children under their care who, after all, are a reflection of their beliefs and practices. Thus, parents need the support of a congregation to give them the competence, confidence, and comfort required for their own faith formation, in order to effectively model and share their faith with their children and teens.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Support of the Institutional Church for the Home**

Though parents are the primary source of religious beliefs and faith practices for the majority of adolescents, according to the Lynns, “Kids need more than their parents for passing on the faith. . . . Kids need at least three Christian adults in their lives who practice a vibrant, vital faith to help them grow in their relationship with God.”<sup>44</sup> Their conclusions are supported by the aforementioned study conducted by The National Study of Youth and Religion, which reported that there was a strong correlation between the most religiously devoted teens in the United States and those with the largest number of non-parent adults in their lives whom they can turn to for support, advice, and help.<sup>45</sup> The teens who reported more caring adults in their lives also had more positive perceptions about the meaning of life, their body and physical appearance, as well as their purpose and future.<sup>46</sup>

Faith formation necessitates the ongoing prevalence of positive intergenerational relationships, and the church provides consistent access to these vital relationships for both teens and adults. Along with support and care, these relationships foster a sense of belonging among

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<sup>43</sup> Roberto, “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation,” 7.

<sup>44</sup> Lynn, *Home Grown Faith*, 25-26.

<sup>45</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 226.

<sup>46</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 225-226.

individuals, which is also essential to faith formation. Once again, as Paul echoed in his words to the Ephesians, “So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). Our connection with God is reliant upon our connection with the people of God. Being joined to God necessitates that we are joined to the *members of the household of God*.

Just as the church offers access to the Christian community and intergenerational relationships, it also provides the basic instructions and teachings of the Christian faith that lay the foundation for faith formation. In order for disciples to be *made* as Jesus instructed his disciples in his Great Commission, they must be *taught* everything that he commanded. As discussed in Chapter One, by restoring the ancient practice of catechesis that is rooted in apostolic tradition, the church can equip families with the basic instructions of the Christian faith, giving them the language they need to speak Christian so that they may learn to live as Christians.<sup>47</sup> Along with laying the foundation of faith formation through the catechumenate, churches also provide practical tools for strengthening families, such as marriage support for young couples through teaching and resources that strengthen marriages and familial relationships, as well as practical assistance to adults who are navigating the transitions and rigors of parenthood.<sup>48</sup> Through these opportunities, the church can provide helpful guidance and structure for parents who are confident of the importance of their role in the faith development of their children but need help knowing where to begin.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Journey*, xiv.

<sup>48</sup> Melinda Lundquist Denton and Jeremy E. Uecker, “What God Has Joined Together: Family Formation and Religion Among Young Adults,” *Review of Religious Research* 60, no. 1 (2018): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26652736>, 3-5.

<sup>49</sup> Cahill, “Family Spirituality,” 678.

## Conclusion

The home may be the primary influence of faith and values, but the American home is often limited in its ability to pass on the Christian faith by the competing voices and influences of the American culture in which it is situated. Rather than being shaped by a biblical faith that stresses historical Christian subjects, including repentance, love of neighbor, social justice, unmerited grace, self-discipline, humility, the costs of discipleship, and dying to self, the Christianity modeled in many American homes is too often wrought with the individualistic, consumeristic, self-focused culture of the greater Westernized society.<sup>50</sup> Christian families need the structure, instruction, and historic tradition of the church to train, equip, and support them for the work of faith formation at home. Through the ministry of the church and the care of a larger Christian community, as my former professor Bruce Powers coined, Christian homes can ensure they are being shaped by a faith that is *Christ-centered, biblically-based, and ministry-focused*.

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<sup>50</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 149.

## Chapter Three: The Development of a “Rule of Life” in the Church

### Introduction

If the patterns and rhythms of our lives form certain ruts, and those ruts determine where we are going (i.e., who we are becoming), then we must be more intentional with the ruts we are forming and mindful of their influence on us. Thus, to deepen faith Christians must choose practices that develop and reinforce their spiritual growth, and that help them live out their beliefs.

Through a historical lens, Paul Fiddes describes the development of “spirituality” during the asceticism movement of the seventeenth century. Though the term continues to be complex both historically and pragmatically, sometimes being used as a non-specific term for “religion,” most people agree that spirituality is a vital part of life.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, through the influences of the early asceticism movement, Christian spirituality became for many somewhat dualistic in both understanding and practice, the goal being to deny the body through rigorous self-discipline in order to defeat the forces of evil within oneself that produce all kinds of lusts of the flesh.

During that time, spirituality was mostly a monastic movement pursued by “individual hermits, seeking solitude, attempt[ing] to rival each other in the excesses of self-denial.”<sup>2</sup> In response to this form of spirituality, which was relegated to an individual endeavor pursued only by the holiest of saints, early church fathers such as Saint Augustine and Saint Benedict provided a meaningful alternative through their commitment to monastic community. Instead of a personal struggle, spirituality and its ascetic impetus were “controlled by being held in a common life, with a common rule.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fiddes, “Baptist Spirituality,” 1.

<sup>2</sup> Fiddes, “Baptist Spirituality,” 2.

<sup>3</sup> Fiddes, “Baptist Spirituality,” 2.

Just as *spirituality* must be understood as more than an individual struggle toward holiness, it must not be reduced to a set of monostatic practices. According to Gary Furr and Curtis Freeman, *spirituality* is also a way to see that is “rooted in shared convictions that enable us to make sense of the Christian life with all of its hopes and contradictions.”<sup>4</sup> These shared convictions include three essential traditions: the *conversionist* (word and sacrament), the *contemplative* (prayer and devotion), and the *corporate* (history and community). Without integration of all three, the *conversionist* can become experience-oriented and narcissistic; the *contemplative* can become legalistic and works-righteousness; and the *corporate* can become socially oriented without spiritual transformation. However, when equally utilized and harmonized, these three traditions can foster a deep *spirituality* within believers as they discover a unique shared life in the Spirit that is bound together by a common faith.<sup>5</sup>

Though contemplative practices such as silence and solitude are necessary spiritual disciplines, centering one’s life in Christ and discovering the matrix of one’s being in relationship with him cannot be separated from Christian community—the communion of saints. It is through the fellowship of *brothers and sisters in Christ* that Augustine and Benedict believed a key meaning of spirituality could be achieved, which was a heightened sense of the presence and mission of God.<sup>6</sup>

At its foundation, faith formation is an intentional pursuit to grow in one’s awareness of God’s presence in order to be transformed by God’s Spirit and conformed to God’s will. As Mulholland describes, “We are being shaped either toward wholeness of the image of Christ or

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<sup>4</sup> Gary A. Furr and Curtis Freeman, ed., *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1994), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Furr and Freeman, *Ties That Bind*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Fiddes, “Baptist Spirituality,” 3.



[potentially] toward a horribly destructive caricature of that image.”<sup>7</sup> He compares this process to reversing the role society often encourages of being the subject who seeks to control the objects of this world, to one of becoming the object who is subject to the purposes of God’s kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Rather than an empire mindset of power and rule that wants to accumulate and achieve, faith formation releases us from the burden and danger of being the controllers of our lives to those who are simply yielded to the power and rule of Christ working in and through us. Developing a posture of submission to God’s Spirit and mission requires a heightened sense of God’s presence, which many early patristics believed necessitated a community of fellow believers held together by their commitment to a common “rule.”

As we will explore in this chapter, just as the church must restore the ancient practice of catechesis for the work of faith formation, I will propose that churches must also utilize the “rule of life” created by early church fathers to strengthen its partnership with families in helping them develop a useful structure for practicing faith formation at home. If catechesis provides the foundation on which faith formation is built within the context of community—the basic beliefs and values that hold the Christian community together—a “rule of life” is an extension of the catechumenate. Establishing concrete steps for living out one’s faith provides the spiritual disciplines and communal practices necessary for holding the community accountable to their shared beliefs and values.

### **The Foundation of a Rule in Scripture**

According to Earley, at its basic level, a “rule of life” is a set of communal habits that everyone agrees to practice for the purpose of being shaped into the image of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Taking

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<sup>7</sup> Mulholland, *Shaped By The Word*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Mulholland, *Shaped By The Word*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 14.

root in the Old Testament through stories such as those found in the book of Daniel, Earley explains that a “rule” can be observed among Daniel and his friends by the way they lived *in* Babylon but were not *of* Babylon, choosing to live differently by the way they ate, drank, and prayed. As those assigned to Nebuchadnezzar’s court, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were expected to eat the Chaldean rations of food and wine allotted for them; instead, they chose to drink water and eat vegetables while they served the king in order to remain undefiled by the Babylonian kingdom (Dan 1:8-17). Despite their service to the king, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego also refused to obey Nebuchadnezzar’s decree to worship the golden statue he had built, which landed them in a fiery furnace (Dan 3:8-20). Even as servants in the king’s court, these friends were not *of* Babylon because they lived differently from those *in* Babylon. The same can be seen in the New Testament church by the way the earliest Christians lived differently from the Romans while living in Roman provinces, “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers . . . selling their possessions and goods and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:42-47).<sup>10</sup>

For the earliest Christians, their faith in Christ was more than a set of beliefs; it was a way of life. Believing in Christ required living in imitation of Christ, and new converts needed a framework for developing this lifestyle. The Latin root for the word “rule” connotes a bar or trellis; rather than being a law that one must obey, it suggests a framework on which one’s life is built that allows life to flourish.<sup>11</sup> Though the ancient practice of a *rule* could become rigid and legalistic, the original purpose for establishing a *rule* for Christians was for them to willingly follow it as a response to God’s love and grace rather than as an effort to gain God’s favor through compliance. God’s people have a long history of struggle, misunderstanding, and

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<sup>10</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 15.

hypocrisy when it comes to their observance of a way of life that honors God. The Apostle Paul understood this problem as one that, at its core, misinterprets the process of justification. Writing to the Church of Galatia, Paul explained as follows:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. . . . I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2:15-16, 21).

Paul wanted the Galatians to understand that justification did not hinge on their believing and acting, but rather was totally dependent upon the action of Jesus Christ. And yet, one's dependence on Christ does not mean humanity's response to faith is insignificant. Rather than a prerequisite for receiving the gift of salvation, Paul contends that the enactment of a new way of life is the appropriate response of faith.<sup>12</sup> As Richard Hays explains, we are justified by God because we "participate in the life pattern of faith enacted by the Son of God."<sup>13</sup> Through our participation in Christ, we are *justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ*.

### **Costly Grace and a Rule**

As was common among the scribes and Pharisees, early Christians struggled in their understanding and relationship with the *rule* (i.e., the laws) that Christ-followers were called upon to observe. Rather than choosing to eat, drink, and pray differently than the Roman culture surrounding them as a faithful response to God's grace by participation in Jesus Christ, obedience was often misconstrued by a spirit of individualism and competitiveness that sought to

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<sup>12</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002), 211.

<sup>13</sup> Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, 212.

earn God's grace through merit rather than receive it as a loving gift. According to Paul, if grace is to be earned then *Christ died for nothing*. And yet, though God's grace cannot be earned, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it is costly. Any other form of grace is cheap. He argues that cheap grace is grace without the rigors of discipleship.<sup>14</sup> In other words, there can be no communion with God through the gift of grace without a commitment to God's law. The practices of the law are intended to draw us out of our self-referenced ways of living so that rather than being conformed to this world, we can be conformed to the rules of God's kingdom by living in a new way on earth.

Unlike the distortion of early monasticism that promoted the Christian life as the extraordinary achievement of a few, the costly grace of which Bonhoeffer spoke was one committed to the long obedience of repentance.<sup>15</sup> Often misunderstood as simply feeling guilty for one's sins, repentance is the lifelong process of reorienting the focus of our attention in God's direction rather than placing ourselves at the center of all things.<sup>16</sup> This reorientation requires a different way of living; new patterns and practices that pull us out of the sinful web of debilitating and destructive habits that determine our lives in ways that are out of our control.<sup>17</sup> Obedience to God's law through the process of repentance is not an attempt to earn God's favor. Instead, it is the constant process of placing God at the center of our being and allowing our relationship with him to be the matrix of our existence.

This choice will create tension in the world around us; it will be costly. Jesus assured his followers of this reality when he lamented to his disciples, "In the world you will face persecution" (John 16:33a). In the same manner as his instructions that "those who wish to be

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<sup>14</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, 14.

my followers must pick up their cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24), Jesus was upfront with his followers that the price of discipleship is high; it requires sacrifice. One example can be heard in his words, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Luke 14:33). Possessions in themselves are not problematic to the process of discipleship. We can be faithful followers of Christ and own property. The command to give up all our possessions is an invitation to step away from the individualism and consumerism of the world, which determine one’s worth by one’s ability to achieve and accumulate, possess, and perform. Selling one’s possessions was not a way to earn God’s favor, but rather a concerted effort to die to self. What we own and hope to accumulate can easily become our master—the thing that defines us, gives us our worth, and determines our goals. According to Jesus, the problem with this mindset is that we cannot serve two masters (Matt 6:24). When wealth is our master, then *we* become the center of our own existence. Selling one’s possessions, therefore, was never intended to prove one’s devotion to God, but rather to die to the self with its egocentric mode of being and rise with Christ to walk *in newness of life* (Rom 6:3-4).

### **An Outward and Inward Rule**

English Dominican priest Conrad Pepler describes the process of dying to self as what Scripture calls *righteousness*. He explains, “The righteous man is the upright man; he is not bent away from God. He is 'plumb'. This plumbness begins with the spiritual life of grace. But to build 'plumb', a man must have a plumbline; he must have a measure.”<sup>18</sup> Because righteousness begins with grace, grace cannot be earned; it is a gift. However, receiving God’s grace does require a certain measurable response, which Pepler calls a “rule.” Using Saint Thomas’s *rule* as an example, Pepler distinguishes between an inner *rule*, which directs the heart, and the outward

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<sup>18</sup> Conrad, Pepler, “A RULE OF LIFE.” *Life of the Spirit (1946-1964)* 1, no. 9 (1947): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43702804>, 272.

*rule*, which directs the body. While the inner *rule* monitors the motivations and desires of the heart, the outward *rule* teaches the body how it should eat and drink, dress, rest, sleep, and walk.<sup>19</sup>

He contends that the outward *rule* is valuable only as much as it serves the internal law and will vary depending on the circumstances of time, place, and person. However, all outward laws of body and deed serve only to help the inward laws of the soul “acquire the habit of love which embraces all the desires of God.”<sup>20</sup> Jesus gave a similar instruction to his disciples in his Great Commandment, which not only affirmed the supremacy of love but also the way in which the outward *rule* serves the inward law of love: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:40). According to Jesus, loving God and neighbor is the linchpin of obedience to the law. Love is the motivation behind obeying the law, and the law provides a *rule* to “build plumb” so that we are capable of loving God with all our heart, mind, body, and soul. It is the outward *rule* of the body that allows the internal *rule* of the heart, mind, and soul to conform to God’s will, which is the law of love.

Henri Nouwen refers to the process of conforming our will to God’s will as one of conversion. Using the practice of solitude as an example, Nouwen contends that solitude is not “a station where we go to recharge our batteries; or, as the corner of a boxing ring, a place where our wounds are oiled, our muscles massaged, and our courage restored to continue our efforts.”<sup>21</sup> The outward disciplines of silence and solitude prepare our soul for conversion—the process in which our old self dies and a new self in Christ is born. The purpose of changing the way we eat, drink, work, and sleep is not to make ourselves better, stronger, or happier. These practices are

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<sup>19</sup> Pepler, “A RULE OF LIFE,” 273.

<sup>20</sup> Pepler, “A RULE OF LIFE,” 275.

<sup>21</sup> Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God Through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003), 17.

not intended to encourage God to support our efforts. The goal is transformation; as we change our minds and behaviors, God changes our hearts.

Marriage and family counselors discuss the impact of the outward on the internal as it relates to physicality in relationships. For some couples, the longer they are married the less physical their relationship can become. As physical affection wanes so too does their desire for one another. In response, many couples do not show physical affection until they feel the inner desire for such behavior. Instead, therapists recommend a reversal. Rather than allowing their inner emotions to completely dictate their behavior toward one another, couples who offer physical affection even when they do not feel affectionate can actually trigger their positive internal emotions toward each other through external behaviors. The purpose of showing physical affection is not to earn the love of their partner, but rather an outward response that continues to activate, affirm, and propel forward the love they already share for each other. A “rule of life” serves the same way in one’s relationship with God. Not only do the behaviors of the *rule* provide a measure for one’s relationship with Christ, but a commitment to the outward behaviors of the *rule* can also activate, affirm, and propel forward the love believers already have for God and neighbor. Instead of trying to earn God’s love, the *rule* offers a way to be *transformed* by and *conformed* to God’s love that has already been given and can only be received as a gift through Christ. As the outward practices of a *rule* provide inward strength through God’s immeasurable gift, there is a living love that forms within us that forces us outward and upward toward a single goal, possession of God.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Pepler, “A RULE OF LIFE,” 276.

## The Development of a Rule in The Early Church

The practice of developing a formalized system of outward disciplines to shape one's inward being toward the law of love revealed and fulfilled by Christ dates back to the first century through documents such as the *Didache*. Potentially written alongside the Gospel of Matthew, the *Didache* offers a unique lens into how early Christian communities lived their everyday lives. As Brown explains, "While Paul's letters provide a window into the development of early churches, no New Testament work provides as detailed a window into the practices of early Christian communities as the *Didache*."<sup>23</sup> As different forms of Christianity emerged from first-century Judaism due to the growing number of Gentile converts, as well as the growing number of second-generation Christians who had not experienced Jesus firsthand, the need for an organized system of belief and practice became increasingly important for preserving the life and teachings of Christ.<sup>24</sup> First-century converts needed to know what to believe and how to behave in order to follow Christ and build community with fellow *brothers and sisters in Christ*.

Though there has been much scholarly debate surrounding both the date of origin and the particular form of the *Didache*, most modern scholarship situates it at the turn of the first century as a document that served as a manual for practicing the Christian faith.<sup>25</sup> Despite the debates that remain about the *Didache*'s particular genre, its function was more significant than its literary classification. Rather than an official "church order," Brown concurs with Joseph Mueller's description of the *Didache* as a "tradition of ecclesiological exegesis" that reframes

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<sup>23</sup> Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Through an insightful and thorough discussion of the *Didache*'s historical debate on its exact composition, Brown engages J.A. Robinson's lectures that influenced a number of twentieth-century scholars to suggest that the *Didache* arose in the third century as a Monastic text, which, in turn, cast a large shadow of doubt on its historical reliability. However, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1948 renewed interest in the *Didache* and its origins. Through scholars such as Jean-Paul Audet, the reliability and historical significance of the *Didache* was reaffirmed during that time, and most current scholarship dates its composition between 50 and 90 CE. Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 23-25.



Old Testament tradition in light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the *Didache* functioned more as a training manual for early Christian teachers and mentors to guide new converts in how to live faithfully in Christian community against the backdrop of an influential Jewish religious tradition that was uniquely positioned within a predominately Hellenistic culture.

Beginning with its teachings in the Two Ways document, the *Didache* provides basic instructions on the practices of Christian living. This material was used for new converts as they prepared for baptism, as well as admission and acclamation into the Christian community. Utilizing Old Testament Scriptures such as Moses's Ten Commandments, Isaiah's image of the Messiah as a servant, Malachi's instructions on confession and sacrifice, the apocalyptic visions from Zechariah and Daniel, as well as New Testament material from Matthew and Luke of Jesus's sayings from his Sermon on the Mount, the *Didache* provided the structure and canonical material needed for fulfilling Jesus's Great Commission of making disciples.<sup>27</sup>

Though Brown contends that the *Didache* was not written solely for church leaders, but also "addresses the community of faith at large—men and women, lay and clergy, all who would choose to follow in the Way of Life," he affirms that it did serve as a prototype for later church orders, such as *Apostolic Constitutions*, as well as early monastic orders, such as the *Rule of the Master*.<sup>28</sup> The Greek word *didache* is often translated "teaching," but can also be rendered as "training." Brown argues that "training" seems to be a more accurate description of the way the *Didache* was used in the early church. Rather than a document that helped transfer a certain set

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<sup>26</sup> Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 44.

of knowledge from teacher to student, the *Didache* served more as a training manual to foster ongoing transformation in one's Christian identity, belief, and behavior.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the central focus of the first six chapters of the *Didache*, which speak mostly to the Two Ways of the individual (the practices that lead to life and those that lead to death), there is a section in Chapter Four that highlights the importance of community. Specifically, this chapter emphasizes how community shapes the individual as each member lives out their life on behalf of the larger community. Just as Scripture expands our concept of home and family, so too does the *Didache*. Addressing the role of mentor and mentee, Chapter Four uses language that imagines the mentor as a spiritual parent and the broader Christian community as a larger reconfigured family.<sup>30</sup> Speaking directly to the divine gift and deep challenges of living in community, the *Didache* discusses key liturgies and daily practices that are essential to the Christian community, including baptism, prayer, and the Eucharist. Brown understands Christian liturgy, as reflected in the *Didache*'s instruction, as “the community’s work toward becoming the embodied presence of Christ in the world . . . . Understood in this way, liturgy may take the form of individual and communal Christian practices.”<sup>31</sup> Through this emphasis on the invaluable role of the Christian community in forming believers in the image of Christ, as well as its guidance in the individual and communal practices that were essential to creating and sustaining such community, the *Didache* was highly influential in the development of later monastic *rules*.

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<sup>29</sup> Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 63.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *The Didache and Traditioned Innovation*, 66.

## The Formalization of a Rule in Early Monasticism

The oldest *rule* in the Western church was written by Saint Augustine of Hippo in approximately 400 CE. This *rule* provided extensive instructions for living in a Christian community, specifically for nuns living a monastic life. Comparable with the *Didache* centuries prior, the goal of this *rule* was to unite their wills to God's will, and therefore, unite their lives to one another. Augustine begins, "Dearly beloved, we ought, above all things, to love Almighty God and then our neighbor; for these are the principal precepts delivered to us in the Holy Scripture."<sup>32</sup> According to the twelfth-century theologian Hugh of Saint Victor, the commands that follow this opening statement are called a *rule* because in them is expressed the pattern of holy living that is the source for direction and instruction.<sup>33</sup> Augustine's intent through this *rule* was that those living in a monastic community would be united in soul and spirit, for as Hugh expounds, "it is of no avail that the same walls encompass us if difference of wills separate us—since God regards rather unity of mind than of dwelling."<sup>34</sup> Seeking to build upon the spirit of Augustine's *rule*, Hugh explains that desiring to be united in will rather than seeking one's own will is necessary for developing and maintaining a spirit of humility within community. From humility, he contends, all Christian virtues increase, which are needed to guard against

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<sup>32</sup> Saint Augustine of Hippo, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 400 CE, comm. Hugh of Saint Victor, trans. Dom Aloysius Smith (London, UK: Chaucer House Press, 2021), 7.

<sup>33</sup> According to Dom Aloysius Smith, Hugh of Saint Victor has been called a "Second Augustine" for his knowledge and familiarity with Augustine's works, as well as his personal similarity in character with the Holy Legislator. At an early age, Hugh became master of the famous school in Paris, the Community of the Canons Regular of St. Victor. His whole life consisted of religious teaching, writing, and study. In philosophy, theology, and mysticism, he is considered one of the greatest influences of the twelfth century. And yet, despite the depth of material he offered academically and spiritually in each of these fields, Hugh believed love was central. He famously asked, "What is to be wise but to love God? For love is wisdom." Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 1-2, 29.

<sup>34</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 30.

destroyers of community, such as quarrels, anger, and dissensions that spring up when all are intent upon following their own will.<sup>35</sup>

Being united in God's love and will, Augustine proposed that everyone had to hold all property and possessions in common (akin to Luke's description of the Acts church), in order to release themselves from the evils that arise through the power of pride.<sup>36</sup> Augustine believed pride is unlike all the other vices that create evil works because it has a way of destroying good works as well. If not careful, Augustine warned the sisters that their souls could become prouder by forsaking riches than possessing them.<sup>37</sup> Thus, giving away one's possessions and sharing them with the community must be accompanied by spiritual disciplines such as prayer and fasting.

The Bishop of Hippo believed a posture of humility required a willingness to listen. To effectively listen to God, one must spend time hearing God through Scripture. However, due to humanity's misplaced desires and the limitations caused by sin, one's interpretation of Scripture is always susceptible to being flawed and imperfect. Therefore, Augustine encouraged Christian leaders to refrain from rushing to conclusions, but to approach biblical reading and questioning by "stripping [themselves] of Goliath and putting on David."<sup>38</sup> This mindset would help disciples continue to push against their own pride, which Augustine believed was also one of the greatest hindrances to listening to God. He contended, "Pride is a form of self-reliance that ultimately proves to be an illusion; humility, pride's opposite, entails relying on God."<sup>39</sup> Approaching God's word with a posture of humble reliance on and attentiveness to God was also necessary for

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<sup>35</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, , *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45).

<sup>37</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 49.

<sup>38</sup> Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Idea* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 186.

<sup>39</sup> Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 184.

developing the discipline of prayer. Speaking specifically to the proclamation of God’s word, Augustine declared, “The preacher must be a person of prayer before he is a speaker of words.”<sup>40</sup> Deeming prayer to be a starting point for all believers, Augustine’s Rule exhorted Christian communities to be attentive to prayer at specific times and appointed hours each day. Not only did this provide consistent space for listening to God and offering one’s petitions to God, but it would also allow Christ’s presence to correct, cleanse, and calm his followers.<sup>41</sup>

Augustine taught that obedience to God also necessitated a commitment to subduing the flesh. A spirit of self-denial can be heard within his *rule* through instructions, such as fasting and abstinence from meat and drink; guarding modesty of dress and religious chastity; confronting one another in love when sinful or destructive behaviors arise; receiving one’s clothes out of the common wardrobe, food out of a common cellar, and books from a common library; seeking pardon and offering forgiveness to all for faults; respecting and obeying one’s superiors; and maintaining a spirit of thankfulness.<sup>42</sup> In the conclusion of his *rule*, Augustine returned to a motive of love, reminding the sisters that rather than slaves to the law, all of these *rules* were to be observed in love under the liberty of grace.<sup>43</sup>

By the turn of the sixth century, as the Roman Empire had fallen to the barbarians and its provinces were disintegrating, Saint Benedict of Nursia began his monastic journey. After leaving Rome to live in solitude for a time in a cave at Subiaco, Benedict was eventually called upon by a group of monks to be their abbot because of his local reputation as a holy man. Unfortunately, this position did not last long because that same group of monks would later try to

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<sup>40</sup> William Harmless, S.J., ed., *Augustine: In His Own Words* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 126.

<sup>41</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 55, 73, 78, 85, 106, 119, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 127.

poison him. After leaving this monastery and being joined by another group of monks, Benedict went on to establish twelve monasteries of twelve monks each. Eventually, he would leave this settlement due to his experience with the envy of local clergy and found a monastery on a mountain above Cassino, which was about eighty miles south of Rome.<sup>44</sup>

Though little else is known about the details of Benedict's life, the legacy of his *rule* has shaped countless monastic religious orders throughout the history of the Catholic Church and continues to be used by Benedictine monks fifteen centuries after its creation. The influence of Benedict's *rule* has been so profound on the hierarchy of the Catholic Church that some regard Benedict as the founder of Western monasticism. According to Timothy Fry, though Benedict's *rule* was written "primarily for monks, its sound principles for working together and living together have proved relevant to people of all classes of society through fifteen hundred years."<sup>45</sup> Even with antiquated language and rules that have been updated and amended by Benedictines over the years, Benedict's *rule* remains ecumenically pertinent for the church today through its Christocentric nature and emphasis on the importance of relationships.

In his address to abbots, Benedict provides two essential teachings for leading a group of disciples. First, they must provide instruction on the commandments of the Lord, teaching the monks under their care what is good and holy. Secondly, they must model these teachings by providing a living example.<sup>46</sup> In all things, their words and actions must reflect Jesus's command: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33). Similar to Augustine, Benedict asserted that fulfilling this call could only be accomplished through a daily commitment to reading Scripture and devoting oneself to prayer. He believed this form of

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<sup>44</sup> Saint Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 530 CE, ed. by Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), first published in 1981 by Order of Saint Benedict (Collegeville), 10.

<sup>45</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 22.

obedience was the first step to humility, which he contended is essential for believers to “put aside their own concerns, abandon their own will, and lay down whatever they have in hand.”<sup>47</sup>

According to Jesus, this kind of discipleship is what the kingdom of God requires, for he declared, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

Following Benedict’s extensive instructions on humility, which include twelve specific steps, as well as his *rules* on the reading and singing of Psalms, participating in Sunday vigils, and reverence to prayer, Benedict presents the *rules* of living together within a community of believers. Despite the criticism his *rule* has received for its instructions on addressing a fellow brother’s faults and the reality of excommunication, Benedict’s goal was healing and unity under the love and will of God for all believers living in community. As such, he exhorts them to distribute their goods based on the needs of each member, serve one another through kitchen service and daily meals, and care for each other when fellow brothers are sick.<sup>48</sup> Benedict’s *rule* continues with an appeal to accompany prayerful reading with manual labor, reminding monks that “idleness is the enemy of the soul,” as Paul accused some in the church at Thessalonica (2 Thess 3:11-12).<sup>49</sup> He concludes with a reminder that God’s will is not just about the manner in which they treat others, but also the way guests are welcomed. He contends, “All guests who present themselves are welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me’” (Matt 25:35).<sup>50</sup> Though criticized by some for its strictness and seemingly harsh legalism, Benedict’s purpose was to provide a structured lifestyle that would “amend faults” and

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<sup>47</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 30.

<sup>48</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 59-61.

<sup>49</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 73.

“safeguard love” for believers seeking to be reformed by Christ and united in love for one another.<sup>51</sup>

### **Applying Monastic *Rules* Today**

If catechesis provides the basic teachings of the Christian faith, the foundation on which the Christian life is built, then a “rule of life” provides the structure on which those beliefs are lived out in one’s everyday life. In the prologue to Benedict’s *rule*, he described monastic communities as “schools for the Lord’s service.”<sup>52</sup> His hope through these communities was that they could learn and develop a new way of doing life that looked different from the Roman culture that surrounded them. Rather than a life consumed with power and possessions, performance and productivity, Benedict’s *rule* proposed an alternate society where people could live a life of prayer together, serving one another and the community around them.<sup>53</sup> It was a life where rich and poor were treated as equals, women could hold leadership roles and live independently with a group of sisters instead of remaining in their father’s house or marrying into another man’s house, and all could experience unique freedom from the violence, poverty, social limitations, and power inequities that were considered *normal* in the society that surrounded them. However, living into this newfound freedom could not be done haphazardly; it did not develop, nor could it be sustained organically. It required a group of people to commit to certain Christian values, spiritual disciplines, and communal practices that would guide their lifestyle, both individually and collectively.

According to Wilson-Hartgrove, committing to the monastic lifestyle was more than discovering a better way of life, it was choosing to live in such a way that participated in God’s

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<sup>51</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 19.

<sup>52</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 47.



plan of salvation and sanctification for the world.<sup>54</sup> The Bible is not addressed to a person, but to a people. This means that apart from God’s people, we cannot have a relationship with God. As he describes, the Bible’s instructions are not “how to make myself good, make myself rich, make myself kind, or make myself humble.”<sup>55</sup> Instead, God’s story of restoration for the world is about how “God makes a people”; thus, Scripture’s instructions must be read, understood, and practiced within a community of believers who are committed to living together as God’s people.<sup>56</sup>

This was the vision of the early church and continues to be the inspiration of monastic communities today. A “rule of life” provides each member of the community a framework for living together as God’s people in such a way that creates fertile soil prepared for the seeds of God’s kingdom to fall and grow. In other words, a “rule of life” *makes a culture* within a community of believers that allows God’s Spirit to *make a people*. In this context, “culture” is understood as the shared beliefs, behaviors, values, and practices of a group of people that both intentionally and inadvertently shape the whole community as it forms and informs the lives of each person. The purpose of early monastic *rules* was to provide a definitive framework for embodying the community’s shared Christian beliefs through specific practices that would nurture a distinctive Christian way of life. Recognizing that *Christians are made, not born*, ancient *rules* sought to create a shared Christian culture within a community of believers that would make Christian people.

How can a “rule of life” that was historically developed for monastic communities apply to modern churches and families today? Gregory Jones offers a helpful perspective on how to

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<sup>54</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 58.

<sup>55</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 59.

<sup>56</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 60.

utilize the traditions of the past in a present context through his description of “traditioned innovation.” He explains this notion as “a way of thinking and living that holds the past and future together in creative tension.”<sup>57</sup> Rather than trying to recreate the past in a contemporary context, traditioned innovation uses the best parts of the past in new and adaptive ways in the present. And yet, the only way to be faithful to the past and utilize it in creative ways in the present is to know the past. Jones asserts, “We can’t innovate without building on the past, and we can’t build on the past unless we know the past.”<sup>58</sup>

Knowing and building on the past is very different from using the “drag-and-drop” method, which believes the same strategies that worked in our past will produce the same results when used in the same way today. Under this assumption, previous successes are “dragged” from the past and “dropped” into the present with an expectation that what worked then will work now. Rather than trying to replicate our past, traditioned innovation seeks to use the best of our past in innovative ways in the present to lead us toward a better future.

Using this approach as it relates to a “rule of life,” rather than trying to simply *drag and drop* Augustine’s or Benedict’s *rule* and use them today in the same way they were written for monastic communities centuries ago, or expecting all Christians to abandon their current homes and join monastic communities in order to apply these ancient *rules* to their lives, I propose that churches can take the best parts of a “rule of life” from its past and equip families to apply them in new and inventive ways in their homes today.

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<sup>57</sup> L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2016), 51.

<sup>58</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 53.

This will require what Jones calls “scalable experiments that, when successful, can create a new equilibrium.”<sup>59</sup> Mark Tidsworth refers to such experiments as “holy experiments.”<sup>60</sup> A holy experiment is based on an action-reflection-action model. Rather than trying to have all the answers before starting a new initiative, this model seeks to learn through action, which is precisely what makes it an experiment. As the world shifts and changes faster than ever, churches cannot wait to have all the answers before they act. Congregations must find the courage to try something new, take time to reflect on what they are learning as they act, and then get out there and try again.

## **Conclusion**

Churches that are seeking to grow in their awareness of God’s presence, be transformed by God’s Spirit, and conform to God’s will, could find a “rule of life” to be a helpful tool in this endeavor. But instead of trying to recreate the past by *dragging and dropping* a monastic *rule*, churches can use the best parts of an ancient “rule of life” in innovative ways to lead their members toward a better future and help their congregations *make a culture* of shared beliefs, behaviors, values, and practices that shape the whole Christian community. This shared culture will, in turn, influence the families who make up the church to create their own “rule of life” for the home by applying specific Christian values, spiritual disciplines, and shared practices observed from within their community of believers.

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<sup>59</sup> Jones, *Christian Social Innovation*, 65.

<sup>60</sup> Mark E. Tidsworth, *ReShape: Emerging Church Practice In A Volatile World* (Chapin, SC: Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2020), 81.

## Chapter Four: The Values and Spiritual Disciplines of a “Rule of Life”

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will defend the strong connection between thought and behavior, and the significance of that connection as it relates to Christians establishing a *rule of life for home*. I will examine the specific Christian values of ancient *rules* that must be cultivated at home by Christ’s followers in order for their lives to be formed by Jesus’ presence and shaped by his mission. The values of these ancient *rules* cannot be developed simply by education or an internal sense of duty. They must be habituated within individuals and families by certain spiritual disciplines and shared practices. Thus, I will also explore the spiritual disciplines of ancient *rules* that help to form the values of a Christian life in the home. Chapter Five will extend this discussion by turning to the shared practices of families that, along with the spiritual disciplines considered in this chapter, can begin to *cultivate a culture* in the home. These practices are centered around certain Christian values that allow Christ’s presence and mission to not only shape the faith of families but also *cultivate a people* more into the wholeness of his image.

Ancient philosophers understood the *values* that shape who we are and determine who we are becoming as “virtues.” Through an examination of virtues, Aristotle sought to define and discover how humans can live an “excellent life.” He believed that a moral life was the path to excellence and that virtues were the skills humans must develop to achieve it. Aristotle argued that the four cardinal virtues of human excellence are wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. He claimed that if one could find a set of practices for developing those four virtues, then one could lead others to live an *excellent life*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kent Dunnington, “Virtue Ethics and Christian Sanctification,” Seven Minute Seminary series by Seedbed, August 23, 2017, video, 1:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MwhVUYtd7Y>.

Rather than “rules” and “rightness,” Aristotle focused on the need to shape one’s desires in such a way that we are naturally inclined to do the things that lead to human excellence. Associate Professor of Philosophy Kent Dunnington explains that an emphasis on “rules” versus “virtues” reflects two different schools of philosophy: modern moral philosophy and virtue ethics.<sup>2</sup> Modern moral philosophy seeks to define and agree on what is “right.” This school of belief argues that once humanity reaches agreement on what is right and wrong, the institution of rules can guide us toward the right actions and help us avoid the wrong actions which, in turn, can ultimately lead us to live a moral life. Virtue ethics, however, argues that right reasons are just as important as right actions because it is possible to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. Virtue ethics, therefore, places much more emphasis on motivations than rules because it contends that the motivations behind our actions reveal our character. Aristotle called the right motives a “settled state of character” but also agreed that there was a place for evaluating individual actions.<sup>3</sup>

Protestant Reformer Martin Luther adamantly opposed virtue ethics because he believed actions flow from persons, but do not make the person in the first place.<sup>4</sup> Luther was critical of any form of philosophy or theology that insinuated that humans could make themselves into moral people or achieve for themselves an *excellent life* through their own actions. He argued that virtuous acts must be understood as a grateful response to God’s great gift of grace. Clarifying Luther’s opposition to the human emphasis of virtue ethics, John Hoffmeyer explains that if humans are trees and our actions are the fruit, “Only God’s regenerative grace can change

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<sup>2</sup> Dunnington, “Virtue Ethics and Christian Sanctification,” 3:57.

<sup>3</sup> Dunnington, “Virtue Ethics and Christian Sanctification,” 3:08.

<sup>4</sup> John F. Hoffmeyer, “Can Lutheran Theology and Virtue Ethics Be Friends?,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 56, no. 1 (2017): 40, <https://onlinelibrary-wileycom.proxy.lib.duke.edu/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/dial.12294>.

us from bad trees, bearing bad fruit, to good trees, bearing good fruit.”<sup>5</sup> We are incapable of making ourselves virtuous. We can choose virtuous acts, but it is only through God’s goodness and grace that our hearts, minds, and souls can be transformed through the Christian virtues that conform our will to God’s will. And yet, there is a reciprocal relationship between inward virtue and outward virtuous acts. As God’s Spirit within us disposes us to act in morally good ways, it is through choosing virtuous acts in the concrete that our inward virtue is strengthened and grows.<sup>6</sup>

Faith formation is fundamentally about developing a deeper trust in God that allows us to be more loyal to God’s will and purposes than our own hopes and desires. It is a consistent effort to focus less on ourselves and more on the presence and mission of Christ. Dunnington understands this as the historic doctrine of Christian sanctification, which he describes as the process wherein our hearts are actually transformed and we gain a new nature that allows us to follow in the way of Jesus out of deep desire and internal inclination, rather than an outward duty-bound rule following position.<sup>7</sup> Instead of a substitution for Christian sanctification, virtue ethics can be a way to structure the conversation of sanctification around the practices that develop the virtues, thus making it possible for humanity to follow in the way of Jesus.

According to Mulholland, this process of transformation is a combination of both detachment and centering: “It is only the detachment from our manipulative and possessive abuse of the world that enables the world to be the place of life with God, and our centering enables our lives to be in the world all that God has created them to be.”<sup>8</sup> Our commitment to

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<sup>5</sup> Hoffmeyer, “Can Lutheran Theology and Virtue Ethics Be Friends?,” 41.

<sup>6</sup> “What is Virtue? Why is it Important in the Christian Life?,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C., 2006, <https://www.archspm.org/faith-and-discipleship/catholic-faith/what-is-virtue-why-is-it-important-in-the-christian-life/>.

<sup>7</sup> Dunnington, “Virtue Ethics and Christian Sanctification,” 4:23.

<sup>8</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 149.

center ourselves in loving union with God and detach ourselves from the false self that develops through our desire to compete, perform, and achieve, cannot be sustained simply through our Christian beliefs. Abandoning ourselves by humbly and faithfully remaining available to God in all circumstances requires a way of living that must affect everything we say and do.

Using a similar structure as virtue ethics, I will argue that it is possible to center our lives in loving union with God through the habituation of certain Christian values, developed by a commitment to the spiritual disciplines and shared practices of a “rule of life” in the home. Justin Earley refers to these disciplines as “habits of the household.” He argues, “It is possible to practice habits of the household that lead our hearts, and our children’s hearts, in new directions . . . these habits profoundly matter to our families’ spiritual formation.”<sup>9</sup> The habits of our home form us, even when those habits are unrealized and unintentional. We cannot control the impact of habits on our lives. However, we can control the types of habits we form, which ultimately determine how we are influenced and what those influences are shaping us into.

### **The End Goal of Habits**

Nationally recognized corporate coach Brendan Burchard equates beneficial habits to practices that help us accomplish a desired goal. He explains it this way: “Success is achieved not by a *specific type of person* but rather by people from all walks of life who *enact a specific set of practices.*”<sup>10</sup> In other words, what we believe may have an influence on our lives, but what we say and do—our daily habits—ultimately determines who we are and what we can achieve. According to Burchard, one of the most important habits anyone can develop is a commitment to seeking clarity in all areas of their lives. In order to cultivate this habit, he believes we must

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<sup>9</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Brendon Burchard, *High Performance Habits: How Extraordinary People Become That Way* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, Inc., 2017), 35.

envision the future we desire, “[our] best self and the ideal self [we’re] trying to grow into.”<sup>11</sup> He also warns that, though it can be tempting to become consumed with all of the daily tasks competing for our attention, we must continue to look ahead and start with the end in mind.

Though I will discuss how using the language of habits to examine the practices of a “rule of life” must be approached carefully, clarifying our goals for establishing this *rule* is an important step in this process. However, for Christians, our ideal future must be more than our personal vision; it must be grounded in God’s ideal future for all things—God’s *telos*. If not grounded in God’s ultimate aim for creation—the restoration of all things through Jesus, the Christ—the goal of developing new habits in our homes can become self-focused and self-serving. We can lose sight of God’s mission, which is far greater than the health, happiness, and contentment of our own homes. As Christians, we cannot fulfill our purpose without understanding the values that faith formation requires, and we cannot develop those values without a commitment to the spiritual disciplines and shared practices that foster these values. However, families must start with the end in mind. If faith formation is the process of growing into the image of Christ, then God’s *telos* must be central to that goal—restoring the image of God within themselves, their homes, and all creation.

### **The Values of a “Rule of Life”**

What Aristotle called virtues, theologian N.T. Wright refers to as character, which he defines as “the pattern of thinking and acting which runs right through someone.”<sup>12</sup> Initiated and accomplished through God’s goodness and grace, Wright insists that there are three steps in the transformation of one’s character: “First, you have to aim for the right goal. Second, you have to

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<sup>11</sup> Burchard, *High Performance Habits*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 27.



figure out the steps you need to get to that goal. Third, those steps have to become habitual.”<sup>13</sup>

The goal of the Christian life is God. We aim to ensure the matrix of our being is continuously formed in loving union with God so that our wills can be united to God’s will, and we may participate in the presence and purposes of Christ. I contend that the steps we must take to get closer to that goal are found in the values that were central to early monastic *rules*; specifically, the values of love, humility, restraint, hospitality, and obedience. Cultivating these virtues within our homes is one way we can move closer to our goal, which is living in the way of Jesus.

Simply having an intellectual awareness and understanding of these values will not automatically develop them within us or our families. They must be cultivated through spiritual disciplines and shared practices. They must become “second nature”—the way we respond to the world without having to think about it. Dunnington provides a helpful example using basketball. He asks, “What makes Lebron James a great basketball player? He naturally reacts in the moment in a way that enables him to do the best thing.”<sup>14</sup> In order to be a great basketball player, one must know the skills that make for a great player. Then, one must consider the practices needed in order to develop those skills. The spiritual disciplines and shared practices of *a rule of life for home* will provide the practices needed in order to foster the skills (i.e., values) of a Christian life. Before we investigate the practices that can habituate the values, we must have a fuller understanding of the values themselves.

The first value of St. Augustine’s and St. Benedict’s *rules* that would guide all other values was love. The opening line of Augustine’s *rule* reminds the sisters that “above all things” they must “love Almighty God and then neighbor; for these are the principal precepts delivered

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<sup>13</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Dunnington, “Virtue Ethics and Christian Sanctification,” 2:53.

to us in Holy Scripture.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Benedict’s *rule* begins by declaring to the monks in his monastery, “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else.”<sup>16</sup> For both Augustine and Benedict, love must be the overarching value because love is the greatest commandment in Scripture. Love is not only the quality on which all of the law and prophets hang but, according to the Apostle John’s account, to love others was the only *new* commandment Jesus ever gave his disciples (John 13:34-35). Since Jesus calls love the greatest commandment and the distinguishing characteristic of his disciples, early patristics believed love must be the principal value that guides all other *rules*.

Describing the overarching purpose for monastic *rules*, Earley explains, “When brothers and sisters who came before us set out to form communal habits . . . They were trying to create a framework of habit on which the love of God and neighbor could grow.”<sup>17</sup> Without a structure for developing a biblical model of love, these early Christians understood that their love might be shaped more by the prevailing Roman culture of self-love. When the love of self reigns, *we* become the center of our world and self-fulfillment becomes our goal. For the Romans (and I would argue for many Americans), this resulted in distorted forms of love that view God, others, and creation as objects to use, control, and consume. In this dichotomy, relationships become places of comparison and competition more so than opportunities for connection, communion, and collaboration. Love of God and neighbor must be the principal value for any household *rule of life*; otherwise, even spiritual disciplines within families can reinforce self-referenced modes of being that perpetuate self-centered systems of relating to and living with God and others.

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<sup>15</sup> Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 15.

When love of God and others is the cornerstone value a *rule of life* seeks to form, then all other values can be understood within this context. After telling a parable wherein Jesus instructed his disciples to always choose a seat in the back when invited to a wedding banquet, he declared, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). Benedict used this passage in his *rule* to describe the importance of humility, which he believed is the beginning of faithfulness. He contended that the first step of humility is the fear of God, which leads “a man to not love his own will nor take pleasure in the satisfaction of his [own] desires.”<sup>18</sup> If we love our will more than God’s will, then we will not be faithful to God’s presence and mission. Without humility toward others, what *we* want will always be more important than serving *their* needs; without humility toward God, *our will* always eclipses *his will*. Thus, humility is the first step to cultivating God’s love and being conformed to God’s will.

As humility develops, Benedict believed another essential value for disciples is possible—“restraint.” Using a number of quotations from the Psalms and Proverbs, Benedict explains the importance of exercising restraint when it comes to the words we use (Ps 38:2-3; Prov 10:19, 18:21). Not only is evil speech problematic, but even good words and constructive talk should often be left unsaid because too many words almost always lead to sin.<sup>19</sup> Benedict’s emphasis on restraining our words reminds families of the power of words that James describes: “Or look at ships . . . they are guided by a very small rudder . . . So also, the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.” (James 3:4-5). Words have the power to make and break relationships. When we put words to our thoughts, we must consider the different ways they may be received. The old adage, “think before you speak,” is an understatement. In seeking to grow in

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<sup>18</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 31-32.

our awareness of God’s presence and mission by deepening our relationships with others, we must exercise thoughtful caution with our words, especially the ones we use with those with whom we live. Showing Christ-like love in our homes often begins with humbly restraining our words. Sometimes, what is left unsaid is just as powerful as what is said.

Benedict believed that monks should be just as thoughtful in the way they receive guests in their monasteries as they are toward one another. He wrote, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me* (Matt 25:35).”<sup>20</sup> Loving God through our love of neighbor must extend farther than our neighbor across the hall; the hospitality we show guests in our home should be an extension of the love we share with our family. If our homes are to be “little schools of love”—homes that are formed by our love of God and neighbor—then we must value the hospitality of the Good Samaritan. In Jesus’s parable, the priest and Levite were on their way to the temple to show their love for God. And yet, because they failed to show hospitality toward the stranger along the road, they did not effectively show love for God or neighbor. Instead, the Samaritan exemplified the Great Commandment because of the hospitality he showed a stranger (Luke 10:29-37). When I entered the dating world as a teenager, my dad advised me, “Watch the way the person you are with treats the waiter at the restaurant; eventually, that is how they will treat you.” We cannot effectively love those within our home as Christ loves without showing hospitality to those who visit our home. The way we treat guests will often indicate and influence how we treat each other.

Jesus indicated to his disciples that in order to abide in God’s love, they had to obey God’s commandments (John 15:10). This emphasis on obedience was not a works-based grace

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<sup>20</sup> Fry, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 73.

that encouraged the disciples to prove or earn God’s love. As Earley contends, Jesus was trying to “create a framework . . . on which the love of God and neighbor could grow.”<sup>21</sup> Without a commitment to certain key Christian values, Christ could not be reflected in their lives or monasteries. To commit to Christ is to obey Christ; to obey Christ is to devote ourselves to living in a new way with others. As love, humility, restraint, hospitality, and obedience become our natural inclination, Christians can ensure everyone in their home is being formed by their love of God and neighbor as they join with the church to achieve God’s telos *on earth as it is in heaven*.

### **The Spiritual Disciplines of a “Rule of Life”**

Writing on the distinctiveness of Christian leadership, Barton contends that “the best thing any of us have to bring to leadership is our own transforming selves.”<sup>22</sup> Though we must be careful about the individualism that comes with overemphasizing ourselves in the sanctification process of transformation, Barton’s point is that Christians must live and lead from the inside out. Rather than a set of techniques, Christian leadership is the fruit of living a life guided by the ongoing transformation of Christ. Even though Barton’s words are directed toward religious leaders, the principles hold true for the home. In order to cultivate the values for living in the way of Jesus in families, the adults within the home must be committed to their own transformation in Christ, which requires the spiritual disciplines of ancient *rules*.

Though each of these disciplines involves individual practices and commitments, early patristics believed their meaning was found in community. Partnering with families to develop *a rule of life for home* is an opportunity for the church to help Christ-followers learn and apply the spiritual disciplines and shared practices needed to habituate these values until they become *second nature*. Though *a rule of life for home* is intended to foster greater faith formation within

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<sup>21</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Barton, *Strengthening the Soul*, 19.

families outside of regularly scheduled church events and ministries, such *rules* have always found their significance within a larger Christian community. Stanley Hauerwas notes that the church “is not a descriptive term but a theological claim about God’s creation of a new people.”<sup>23</sup> It is through the worship, sacraments, ministries, and everyday activities of the church that the significance of one’s spiritual disciplines deepens. Rather than affirming the individualism of the current age, a greater emphasis on spiritual disciplines in the home is intended to strengthen each family’s desire and ability to live in the way of Jesus within the body of Christ, which is the church. It is through the church that individuals and families can be formed and disciplined by the relationships and liturgies of the congregation that make possible an extraordinary social witness far bigger than themselves.<sup>24</sup>

In partnership with the church, spiritual disciplines are one of the ways adults can *cultivate a culture* within themselves that is able to habituate the values of a *rule* within their homes. Just as soil must be prepared to receive the seeds planted within it for those seeds to sprout, take root, and grow, so too must we ensure that the soil in our lives and homes is ready to receive the seeds of God’s kingdom within them. Jesus spoke of this in his parable of the Sower. The determining factor of whether the seeds would grow was the condition of the soil on which they were sown. The seeds that landed on the rocky ground or fell among the thorns were not able to take root and develop. They were either scorched by the heat or choked by thorns. But the seeds that fell on the good soil were able to sprout, grow, and produce grain (Matt 13:3-8). Like the soil in Jesus’s parable, spiritual disciplines prepare us to receive God’s presence, hear his

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “The Ministry of a Congregation: Rethinking Christian Ethics for a Church-Centered Seminary,” *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living In Between* (Eugene: OR, 1988), 112.

<sup>24</sup> Hauerwas, “The Ministry of a Congregation,” 125.

voice, and permit his will to grow within so that the values of a *rule* flow naturally from our homes and families.

Barton insists that all spiritual disciplines must begin with a commitment to silence and solitude. She describes solitude as the act of intentionally placing ourselves in a secluded place that silences the world around us, and she distinguishes silence as the discipline of seeking to quiet the loud voices and chaotic space within us.<sup>25</sup> She adds that Christians “cannot be a force for good if [we are] not being refined by the rigors of true solitude.”<sup>26</sup> She believes it is our commitment to silence and solitude with God that will ultimately determine the depth of our Christian formation.

Fiddes refers to this discipline as one of *attentiveness*. He contends, “To live under the ‘rule’ or the sway of Christ [means] to cultivate the habit of attentiveness to the demand that Christ makes upon us in everyday life.”<sup>27</sup> Far superior to any other human, Christ’s existence and mission on earth were perfectly in sync with God; thus, by giving attention to Christ’s presence in our lives we can be in harmony with his mission.<sup>28</sup> Like Barton, Fiddes believes attention demands silence, and silence requires stillness. By cultivating this discipline in our lives, we can journey “both ‘inward’ and ‘upwards’ at once, trusting what Christ is doing within us through our silence.”<sup>29</sup>

Both Augustine and Benedict include instructions for silence in their *rules*. Augustine directed the sisters, “When you are at the table, be attentive, without noise or contention, to that which according to your custom is read, until you rise from the meal.”<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Benedict

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<sup>25</sup> Barton, *Strengthening the Soul*, 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> Barton, *Strengthening the Soul*, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, “Spirituality and Attentiveness: Stillness and Journey,” in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2008), 26.

<sup>28</sup> Fiddes, “Spirituality and Attentiveness,” 26.

<sup>29</sup> Fiddes, “Spirituality and Attentiveness,” 30.

<sup>30</sup> Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 11.

commanded, “Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times . . . whether for fast days or for ordinary days.”<sup>31</sup> All spiritual disciplines must begin with listening to God, and listening to God (as is true in any relationship) requires the hearer to be silent. Without an intentional effort to make space for solitude, silence is almost impossible to achieve; without silence, one cannot consistently listen or effectively respond to God. The formative power of all other spiritual disciplines is dependent upon one’s ability to be attentive to God’s presence.

Silence and attentiveness must be accompanied by Scripture reading. Nouwen asserts, “As long as our hearts and minds are filled with words of our making, there is no space for God’s Word to enter deeply into our heart and take root.”<sup>32</sup> When speaking of the Word of God, it is important to define exactly what that means because it is such a complex phrase. As the Gospel of John describes, the Word of God *made flesh* is Jesus; he is the source of life, the light of all people (John 1:4). Scripture, on the other hand, as Paul described to Timothy, is the *inspired* Word of God and is useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training (2 Tim 3:16). The *written* Word of God prepares us to receive the Word of God *made flesh* whose power and presence are available to us through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is not the source of life, but it does uniquely and intimately connect us to that source. If we are not consistently reading and hearing the *written* Word of God, then we are not ready to receive the Word of God *made flesh* through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>33</sup>

And yet, to ensure that Scripture is able to do within us what Paul described to Timothy, Mulholland argues that we must make a shift in the way we read Scripture; we must move from

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<sup>31</sup> Fry, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 64.

<sup>32</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publisher, 2006), 97.

<sup>33</sup> Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 43.



an informational model to a formational model of reading.<sup>34</sup> Informational reading is necessary in life. Assembling a piece of furniture requires informational reading to ensure the pieces are put together correctly. Reading the owner's manual of a car requires informational reading to confirm we understand the components of the vehicle and how to operate it properly. The intent of this form of reading is to supply us with information about something we want to know, a skill we want to develop, a goal we want to achieve, a solution to a problem we want to solve, or an answer to a question we want to explain. Informational reading is not how Scripture was intended to be read.

Formational reading is different. Rather than using the material to achieve our purposes, it is intended to shape our purposes; informational reading is meant to inform us, while formational reading is meant to transform us. Instead of only enlightening our minds, formational reading allows our minds to be changed.<sup>35</sup> This is what Paul wanted Timothy to understand about Scripture. Instead of helping us to know something more or do something better, God speaks through Scripture to *teach, reprove, correct, and train* us that we may be formed by something different than our own plans and purposes. The point of the *written* Word is to connect us with the Word *made flesh* so that “the text becomes an experience of an encounter with God.”<sup>36</sup> As parents personally connect with Christ through consistent Scripture reading, the soil of their homes will be better prepared for the seeds of faith to strengthen and grow.

As we become attentive to God through silence and solitude, and experience personal encounters with God through Scripture reading, our hearts and minds will be prepared for one of

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<sup>34</sup> Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word*, 61.

the most foundational spiritual disciplines of the Christian faith—prayer. Both Augustine’s and Benedict’s *rules* spoke of the vitality of prayer. Augustine instructed the sisters, “Be attentive to prayer at fixed times and appointed hours.”<sup>37</sup> This was not intended to limit their opportunities for prayer, but instead to ensure the disciplined *habit* of prayer was being formed. Warning monks about the self-serving nature that prayer can become, Benedict instructed, “How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the Lord God of all things with the utmost humility and sincere devotion.”<sup>38</sup> Though prayer is one of our primary sources of communication with God, and offering our petitions to God in prayer is biblical, prayer must be far more than sharing with God all of our wants, needs, hopes, and dreams (Phil 4:6).

As Mulholland describes, “To do something in the name of the Lord Jesus is . . . to do it in a manner that manifests Jesus’s very nature.”<sup>39</sup> In order for our prayers to be formational over functional, relational over transactional, our prayers must be a response to God. God is the speaker and we are the listeners. When we speak, we must do so *in a manner that manifests Jesus’s nature*; one that honestly offers our petitions—*My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me*—but ultimately concludes, *yet not what I want but what you want* (Luke 22:42). Rather than hoping God will do what we ask of him, prayer must become an opportunity for us to be open and receptive to what God is asking of us.

Families cannot live in the way of Jesus, cultivating the values that transform their hearts to live in this new way, without a commitment to prayer. This practice must be more than an exercise of the mind wherein we think about God or a monologue in which we simply talk to God. Prayer must come from the heart if it is going to change our hearts.<sup>40</sup> A prayer of the heart

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<sup>37</sup> Victor, *The Rule of Saint Augustine*, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Fry, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 139.

<sup>40</sup> Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 71.

is the space where our fractured love is renewed by God’s perfect love, and our will can be conformed to God’s will.

As prayer relocates the center of our attention by restoring our hearts to God, we are prepared for one of the most central practices of a *rule*—worship. As echoed by Christians throughout the ages, a heightened sense of God’s presence and mission cannot be achieved among believers without a disciplined commitment to worshipping within the context of a congregation.

Benedict instructed the monks that worship also had to be a central discipline of their life together in community. The Sunday Vigils would be comprised of multiple readings from the Psalms, Prophets, and New Testament. Each reading would be followed by a versicle that the monks would declare in unison. Mixed in with their spoken responses to Scripture, Benedict instructed the brothers on certain chants and harmonic responses to the reading, such as “Glory be to the Father.”<sup>41</sup> Corporate worship was central to life in community for early monasteries, and thus, is a characteristic of ancient *rules*. Though the order of worship varied between traditions, common elements included Scripture readings, recurrent responses, congregational hymns, blessings, and the Eucharist offered by the abess or abbot. The centrality of worship has been affirmed ecumenically across all Christian traditions and denominations. Though families can worship at home, parents and children need the support of the larger church. It is through the church that families are able to practice the sacraments and experience a deeper significance of their worship through a congregation.

Despite diversity of worship among different Christian traditions, Christopher Ellis notes that “the expectation that worship will be an arena in which God will engage with those on the

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<sup>41</sup> Fry, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, 40.

threshold of faith is widespread.”<sup>42</sup> Worship provides space for the worshipper to encounter God, as well as become more aware of the mission of God through the people of God within the context of a congregation. Ellis continues, “The whole of worship, in so far as it engages with God, is engaging with a missionary God . . . that turns [our] attention to the world for which Christ died.”<sup>43</sup> It is through congregational worship that individuals and families are reminded not only of their social witness, but that they are a “storied people” people who are a part of “God’s story” of restoration, and that story is learned only as it is lived through the lives of others.<sup>44</sup>

## Conclusion

What we say and do in our homes is not only a reflection of what we believe, but ultimately shapes our beliefs. By identifying some of the core values of early monastic *rules* that the ancients believed allow us to be formed in the way of Jesus, as well as the spiritual disciplines that provide necessary practices for living out these values, families can begin to cultivate a culture that is shaped more by their faith than the individualism, consumerism, and frenetic busyness that characterizes Western society. Similar to Peter Drucker’s assertion that “Culture eats strategy for breakfast,” Lafley and Martin contend that “Culture trumps strategy.”<sup>45</sup> When it comes to making changes within organizations, they assert that what is cultivated within the people of the organization will determine the results of any change.<sup>46</sup> No matter how well the purpose is defined or the strategy for achieving that purpose is laid out, the culture of the people within the system will have an immense impact on the outcome of the initiative.

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<sup>42</sup> Christopher Ellis, “Spirituality and Mission: Gathering and Grace,” in *Under the Rule of Christ: Dimensions of Baptist Spirituality*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2008), 174.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Ellis, “Spirituality and Mission,” 175.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 92.

<sup>45</sup> Lafley and Martin, *Playing to Win*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Lafley and Martin, *Playing to Win*, 136.

In order for Christians to be transformed by God’s presence and mission through Christ, they must cultivate a culture within their homes that seeks to strengthen their relationships with God and each other. However, this cannot be achieved independently from the church. Faith formation at home endeavors to draw families deeper into God’s story by uniting them with a larger community of believers who seek to learn, interpret, and live out their shared story in Christ in the way it was always intended—together “with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).

As families commit to the practices of silence and solitude, Scripture reading, prayer, and congregational worship, they can begin to live by the spiritual disciplines of a *rule* that help them embody some of the values of these ancient *rules*—love, humility, restraint, hospitality, and obedience. And yet, the goal is not to achieve excellence through the values themselves. Instead, through concrete practices that help to develop these values within their homes, families can be shaped more by the unique purpose and marks of a Christian life, which is to be formed by God’s presence and mission in the world.

## Chapter Five: The Shared Practices of a “Rule of Life” for Home

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide the core shared practices that families must integrate into the rhythms of their household in order to create *a rule of life for home*. Though there will be variations in the way these practices are applied to different households, I will contend that families who implement them in some way to the patterns of their home will have better success in developing the values that allow them to regularly find their deep center in Christ. The shared practices I will propose are not an exhaustive list; they are not a guaranteed formula for *making* Christians. However, when applied with consistency, I will argue that they will increase the likelihood of individuals and families being formed by their faith and shared life in meaningful ways. Additionally, I will discuss how churches can shift their ministries to support families in this work and conclude with practical steps for how families can get started on this journey.

Developing *a rule of life for home* is ultimately about individuals and families discovering their God-given power to create. This is less about households instituting a certain set of rules for everyone to obey, and more about families becoming aware and intentional about the rhythms and patterns of their homes. In a culture characterized by busyness, productivity, and consumerism, it can be easy for families to lose control of their time, values, and choices, which creates exhaustion and fragmentation. As Wigger notes, “The more others create our lives for us and run our daily patterns, the less meaningful our lives and daily patterns are.”<sup>1</sup> *A rule of life* is not intended to give families one more thing to *do*, but rather develop a new structure of daily grooves for the home, which will help them discover a different way to *be* in the world with each other that allows them to be shaped by God’s presence and mission.

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<sup>1</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 108.

*A rule of life for home* allows families to unleash their capacity to create, which is the God-like essence of their identity. The process of creating must be planned and spontaneous; a practice that makes room for God to form us in the expected and unexpected moments of life. Without spontaneity, a *rule* can become a rigid method for seeking to control life rather than experience abundant life. However, without the intentionality of a *rule*, we can become inattentive to God's presence and mission in the mundane, everyday moments of our lives. According to Earley, an implicit claim of Scripture is that "We don't have to retreat to the mountain tops or solitary edges of human experience to meet God and serve him."<sup>2</sup> God can be found in the everyday conversations and activities of our families.

Faith formation at home does not happen organically; it needs traditions and rituals that consistently bring faith and life together, as well as flexibility to engage with faith in the unexpected moments of life. *A rule of life for home* provides a means for ensuring Christ is not compartmentalized to the regularly scheduled ministries of the church, and faith formation is not reduced to certain days and times of the week. At Duke Divinity School, I often heard David Goatley state that "context determines content"<sup>3</sup> when it comes to Christian leadership and preaching. The same is true for faith formation in the home. As Powell and Clark argue, "Parents have to be creative . . . organic and contextual in bringing ordinary issues and faith together."<sup>4</sup> The distinctive context and unique circumstances of every family will strongly influence the content and focus of faith formation within each home.

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<sup>2</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> David Emmanuel Goatley is the newly elected president of Fuller Seminary. Prior to his appointment, he served as the associate dean for academic and vocational formation, Ruth W. and A. Morris Williams Jr. Research Professor of Theology and Christian Ministry, and director of the Office of Black Church Studies at Duke Divinity School.

<sup>4</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 41.

For adolescents and adults to develop a robust faith that pushes back against the individualism and compartmentalization of religious mutations such as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, faith and life must be creatively integrated into the situations and conditions of family life. This will require the adults of the home to shake off the classroom education model for learning the disciplines and practices of a *rule*. Instead, they must ensure there is “fun, joy, and meaning . . . which motivates us to devote the time and energy it takes to practice or work on learning.”<sup>5</sup> Learning creates meaning, and practice sustains learning; fun produces joy, and joy propels practice. When fun is lost, so too is the joy of practice. Over time, as the joy of practice wanes, the habits that sustain consistent practice will begin to erode. Since practice generates learning and meaning, the importance of incorporating fun with a *rule* is invaluable.

What brings enjoyment will vary between families; however, *a rule of life for home* must include rituals that families like doing together. Similar to Father Patrick Peyton's famous slogan, “The family that *prays* together stays together,” most experts on the family support the notion that “the family that *plays* together stays together.” Doing things together as a family creates cohesiveness and well-being. Through conversation and trial and error, families must discover what they enjoy doing together and develop rituals for doing that activity regularly. Rituals build identity and reinforce community; they provide the comfort of history, regularity, and tradition.<sup>6</sup> The more families ritualize ways to enjoy and celebrate life together, the easier it will be to develop rituals for engaging in spiritual disciplines and faith formation practices. Ultimately, the core communal practices of *a rule of life for home* are shared rituals that shape the family's identity around their faith by cultivating the values that can strengthen their relationships with

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<sup>5</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 129.

<sup>6</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 61.



Christ and each other. For the remainder of the chapter, we will explore the seven core shared practices of *a rule of life for home*.

### **Shared Blessings**

Not only is what we believe reflected in the words we say, but also what we say shapes what we believe. Accordingly, the practice of *shared blessings* challenges families to consider the words they offer most in their homes and the truths these words are speaking into creation. As we show *restraint* in the words we use with those in our home, we must also be intentional in our choice of words, giving particular attention to the most common words and phrases used by our family members. When it comes to children and adolescents, the words their parents frequently use with them create distinct messages, and those messages shape what they believe about God, themselves, others, and the world around them.

In Genesis, God “spoke” everything into existence—“Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3). As those created in God’s image, the words we speak in our home create specific truths for the people with whom we live, especially when it comes to children. Our words have the power to bless them or curse them, to create hope or despair, love or hate, peace or fear (Prov 18:21).

It is easy for the words we use with our children to be mostly functional—*hurry up; get up; clean up; brush your teeth; go to bed; don’t be late*. Though functional words serve a needed purpose, they are often task-oriented and performance-based. Even when unintended, functional words create formational messages. If we are constantly saying “hurry up,” the message we may be sending is “you are always late.” This forms identities that carry into adulthood with statements such as, “I’m just not a very punctual person.” Thus, Earley contends that one of the

most important practices to develop in the home is shared liturgies of blessing.<sup>7</sup> This may be a morning or bedtime blessing; it could be a blessing offered before a meal or following a conflict. The key is that it is offered to each other rather than to God. Like a familiar mealtime prayer, the words of a *shared blessing* that family members say to each other must also be memorized by everyone in the home and offered to one another on a consistent basis as the situation arises for which the blessing was created. For example, rather than simply telling our kids we love them before they go to bed, Earley recommends:

Parent: Do you see my eyes?

Child: Yes.

Parent: Can you see that I see your eyes?

Child: Yes.

Parent: Do you know that I love you?

Child: Yes.

Parent: Do you know that I love you no matter what bad things you do?

Child: Yes.

Parent: Do you know that I love you no matter what good things you do?

Child: Yes.

Parent: Who else loves you like that?

Child: God does.

Parent: Even more than me?

Child: Yes.

Parent: Rest in that love.<sup>8</sup>

Through this blessing, the child goes to bed knowing they are loved by their parent and by God. This love is not task-focused or performance-based; it is based on *who* they are rather than *what* they do. When *shared blessings* such as this one become a nightly ritual, everyone goes to bed being reminded of their love for each other and God's love for them. Over time, this ritual helps to cultivate the value of love within everyone in the home, by forming them through the truth these shared words of blessing create.

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<sup>7</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 6.

## Shared Meals

According to Wigger, “Meals are more than food. They teach and sustain a community’s values.”<sup>9</sup> Within Jewish and Christian cultures, meals are used to retell important stories that continue to shape the identity of followers today. Whether through the bitter herbs used during Passover to teach about the bitterness of slavery in Egypt, the unleavened bread that represents the swiftness with which the Jews fled Pharaoh, or the broken bread and poured-out wine that Christ used to symbolize the sacrificial love of his crucifixion, food around the table connects believers with their shared history and story. Anthropologists and psychologists are often particularly interested in what happens around the table within different cultures and societies because the rituals of their communal meals almost always uncover a great deal about their beliefs, values, and relationships.<sup>10</sup>

*Shared meals* have a way of connecting people, creating conversation, and building relationships. According to the Lynns, the most important meal anyone can eat is the meal they share with their family because they are building relationships with those who are closest to them.<sup>11</sup> They also note studies that suggest teenagers who share five or more meals each week with their family are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, or struggle with loneliness, depression, and feelings of inadequacy.<sup>12</sup> One reason for the positive impact of shared family meals is that along with access to food, they give families access to each other. The more children have access to their parents, the more potential there will be for building stronger relationships with them. The better the relationship, the more likely adolescents are to trust their parents, as well as the beliefs and values of their parents. Powell and Clark contend that trusting

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<sup>9</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 140.

<sup>10</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 139.

<sup>11</sup> Lynn, *HomeGrown Faith*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Lynn, *HomeGrown Faith*, 27.

God is the call of the gospel, and the key to developing sticky faith.<sup>13</sup> In order for families to be formed by their trust in God, they must also trust one another. *Shared meals* nurture trusting relationships within families.

According to Earley, *shared meals* can also become a *keystone habit*—habits that support a lot of other good habits.<sup>14</sup> Not only do *shared meals* foster trusting relationships and connect people with their shared history and values, but the time around the table is also the place where other core communal practices can take place, such as *meaningful conversations*, *shared devotions and prayers*, and *shared experiences*. Despite busy schedules and the constant barrage of calendar events, families must make time to share weekly meals.

The goal is five or more meals together every week. It does not have to be dinner; it can be breakfast or lunch. It does not have to be a home-cooked meal; it can be take-out. The key is that everyone is gathered around the table, eating the same food, and sharing the same space without any distractions (e.g., electronic devices of any kind). As Roberto contends, “Just as a meal was central to the ministry of Jesus, the shared family meal can be a central faith experience for family members.”<sup>15</sup> Through this practice, not only can families grow in their love for one another, but they can also develop a culture of hospitality by regularly inviting others to be a part of their shared meals.

### **Shared Devotions and Prayers**

There is power in words and stories that are shared aloud, which means there is power in reading out loud together as a family.<sup>16</sup> This is true, especially in families with children. Just as reading stories to children is pivotal in their own reading and comprehension development,

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<sup>13</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 55.

<sup>15</sup> Roberto, “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation,” 7.

<sup>16</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 138.

reading Scripture as a family is critical to their faith formation. Though the Bible is a big and complex book, it also contains the most significant truths of our understanding of God: “God is real. God loves you. Good and evil exist. God will win. You are made in the image of God. Jesus died for you. He also rose for you. He will never leave you.”<sup>17</sup> If the words we speak have the power to create, then by reading the central truths of the Bible aloud with our family, we create an opportunity for these biblical truths to become and remain inherent in the lives of our family.

*Shared devotions* give families an opportunity to learn the core teachings of the Christian faith, which was always intended to be a part of the home every day of the week and not just Sunday.<sup>18</sup> This is what Moses instructed when he ordered the Israelites to “recite” the commandments to their children and “talk about them” when they are at home and when they are away, when they lie down and when they rise (Deut6:5-7). Families cannot be shaped by their faith in Christ—the Word of God *made flesh*—unless they are consistently reading the *written* Word of God. By habituating this practice in the rhythms of their home, families can consistently cultivate their obedience to God by staying connected to the story that teaches and demonstrates the Christian way of life.

Families must carve out time on a consistent basis to read the Bible and pray together. Scripture must accompany family prayers because it is through the Bible that we learn how to pray. Scripture teaches us that while offering our personal petitions to God is part of prayer, the goal of prayer is for us to be conformed to God’s will, rather than God being conformed to our will. To ensure these shared devotions and prayers do not become a grueling and dreaded exercise, families must keep it real; keep it mixed up; and keep it moving.<sup>19</sup> Everyone must get a

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<sup>17</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 121.

<sup>18</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Letters*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Lynn, *Home Grown Faith*, 21.

chance to read, ask questions, give their perspective, share a story, and engage with the material. Parents must stay away from lecturing, and get their children's input on keeping it short, simple, and fun. Families must experiment with their choice of materials, times of day, locations, and formats. When children become teenagers, the more feedback they can offer for when and how devotions are most effective for them, the more engaged they will be with this practice. The more invested adolescents become in *shared devotions and prayer* with their families, the higher the probability that their faith will stick.

### **Shared Worship**

Families need to worship together regularly with a congregation. The point is not that every family member will always get something out of it, but that through communal worship every family member will always see others getting something out of it.<sup>20</sup> Children need to see their parents getting something out of worship, as well as other kids getting something out of it. Parents need to see other families making worship a priority. Families need the support of a broader community of faith, and corporate worship is part of that support.

Additionally, worship provides families an opportunity to learn together, which is essential to cultivating humility. According to Roberto, intergenerational learning is central to lifelong faith formation—"Intergenerational learning provides a way . . . to bring all ages and generations together to learn with and from each other . . . and practice the Christian faith."<sup>21</sup> Through intergenerational learning, children are given an opportunity to be humbled by how much they do not know about life and faith, and adults are humbled by how much they need to learn from the way children practice their faith. Though churches must be creative in offering a variety of different opportunities for intergenerational learning, weekly worship provides the

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<sup>20</sup> Lynn, *Home Grown Faith*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Roberto, *Lifelong Faith*, 52.

most consistent time for families to engage in this critical shared practice. Consistently worshipping with a community of faith will support the other faith formation practices happening within the home. According to Powell and Clark, one reason for this, as their research indicates, is that children and teenagers need at least a 5:1 adult-to-child ratio to develop sticky faith.<sup>22</sup> Adolescents need a sticky web of trusted adults who support them in their relationship with Christ in order to be formed by their faith. Oftentimes, these adults can say things to them that their parents cannot, and the teenagers are willing to say things to these trusted adults that they would not share with their parents.<sup>23</sup> Worshipping with a church provides the most consistent opportunity for these relationships to build and sustain, which may be why there is a strong link between sticky faith among teenage and college students and regular attendance at churchwide worship.<sup>24</sup>

### **Shared Meaningful Conversations**

Earley contends that there is a powerful connection between prayer and shared conversations with others. He notes, “In each, we are reaching toward the divine paradigm we are made for—to commune in conversation, to know and be known.”<sup>25</sup> If the words we consistently use create truths in our lives and families, then the words we share with others and those that they share with us have the power to create trusted relationships. Conversation is not simply something we do, but rather is part of who we are as those created in the *imago Dei*. Relationships are an impossibility without conversation, and we were made for relationships. Like the words we consistently use, families must work to ensure they are providing space for more than just functional conversations—What’s for dinner? Who’s picking up the kids? What

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<sup>22</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 105.

<sup>23</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 106.

<sup>24</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 97.

<sup>25</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 179.

are our plans for the weekend? These questions create conversation, but usually, the goal is functional. Though necessary, families must also create *meaningful conversations* where everyone in the home consistently has an opportunity to know and be known. Teaching children the art of conversation provides an opportunity to cultivate restraint, as everyone takes turns sharing and listening.

According to the Lynns, *meaningful conversations* must also include God-talk.

“Discussions about Jesus, prayer, forgiveness, grace, and other faith topics help connect God to everyday life.”<sup>26</sup> Just as positive family-talk is a characteristic of strong families, consistent God-talk is a characteristic of strong faith within families. As Wilson-Hargrove notes, what is talked about in the home and the stories adults share with their children ultimately reveal what is most important to them.<sup>27</sup> “If God is only mentioned in congregational life, it is difficult for children to see the sacred possibilities of everyday living.”<sup>28</sup> By consistently talking about God in the home, children learn that faith is important to their parents. Creating a comfortable space for children to share their thoughts on God reinforces their belief that their parents care about them and their perspective on God. Unfortunately, God-talk is not a common practice among many Christian families. Powell and Clark note that in a nationwide study of 11,000 teenagers across 561 congregations that include six different denominations, only 12 percent of teenagers report having regular conversations about faith with their parents. Even further, only a fraction of the 12 percent reported talking about the hard subjects of faith with their parents, such as sex, money, and doubts.<sup>29</sup> These findings are significant because their research also indicates a direct

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<sup>26</sup> Lynn, *Home Grown Faith*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*, 70.

<sup>28</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 143.

<sup>29</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 71-72.



relationship between faith development among adolescents and consistent faith-based conversations in the home between parents and their kids.<sup>30</sup>

Families must make space for *meaningful conversations*—words and stories that are intentionally formational rather than consistently functional. These conversations can take place in the car, over a meal, or during family devotions. As children become teenagers, parents must be more creative in the way they make space for these conversations. Often, the more direct questions that parents ask, the more teenagers may begin to shut down. Parental lectures are often unproductive, as well.<sup>31</sup> Parents who approach these conversations as relaxed, casual, and open-ended often have better success with teenagers than those who have an agenda, ask a lot of questions, and try to push the conversation. Without oversharing, parents must model honesty and vulnerability to receive the same from their kids.<sup>32</sup> In addition, parents must practice restraint by actively and intentionally listening to their kids if they want their kids to listen to them. By providing a safe, nonjudgmental, open, honest, and interested atmosphere, parents can foster meaningful conversations with their family that strengthen their bond with one another and nurture their relationship with God.

Because priorities and interests change when kids become teenagers, meaningful conversations as well as maintaining faith formation practices with teens often become more challenging. Instead of being discouraged, parents must be creative and flexible, continuing to focus on the shared activities their teens might be open to—such as enjoying family time at meals, a family trip, or playing a game with family members—and use those as opportunities to create *meaningful conversations*.

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<sup>30</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 87.

## Shared Chores and Acts of Service

Since the beginning of humanity, there has been an expectation of service—“The Lord took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Eden was Adam and Eve’s home, and they were expected to care for it. Scripture does not specify what their chores were, but caring for the Garden was more than “upkeep.” Ellen Davis explains through an agrarian lens that humanity’s call in Genesis views creation not as an inert object to work on, but as a “fellow creature that can justly expect something from us whose lives depend on it.”<sup>33</sup> We do not know the specific tasks God gave the first humans; however, the Hebrew text suggests that their role was to work *for* the Garden, serving its needs as it met their needs. Davis notes that the Hebrew wordplay of the phrasing “to till it and keep it” can also suggest a form of worship. Though biblical teachings clearly forbid deifying creation itself, the word worship originally meant “to acknowledge worth,” which in this case could connote that the soil is worthy of our service.<sup>34</sup>

*Shared chores* in the home are one of the ways parents can acknowledge and teach this important biblical truth to their children of the reciprocal relationship between humanity and creation found in Genesis. Similar to the way Eden demanded humanity’s respect and reverence as their survival was dependent upon its flourishing, *shared chores* are a practice parents can utilize to ensure their children humbly understand the gift and responsibility that their home (and all of creation) requires of them. Rather than something to live *on* and consume, families can begin to see that just as Adam was placed in the Garden as a protector, “answerable for the

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<sup>33</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 29.

wellbeing of the precious thing that he did not make,” our homes and land are a gift we must live *with* and serve.<sup>35</sup> Our flourishing is dependent upon their flourishing.

As part of a *rule*, chores should not be financially compensated, applauded for performance, or used as punishment. Instead, they are intended to provide spouses, parents, and children an opportunity to work together to care for the home that cares for them. When kids take out the trash, fold the laundry, or weed the flowerbeds in the yard, they are participating in God’s call upon humanity from the beginning to *till* and *keep* the garden entrusted to their care—their home and the rest of creation that surrounds it. Additionally, they are given an opportunity to work alongside their family members to accomplish a goal that is greater than themselves.

The hope of this teaching is that it will extend far beyond the walls of each family’s home. As families consider how to be good stewards of their own property, they will understand their call to be obedient in caring for all creation—God’s property. This requires more than cleanliness and tidiness, but limiting waste by recycling, choosing products that can be reused rather than thrown out, and planting flowers that support wildlife. At our home, my family has begun to make small changes such as cloth napkins and washable paper towels over paper products, coffee grounds over K-cups, powdered detergent over plastic pods, and full loads of laundry over half loads (for water conservation). We also replaced our dying boxwood bushes with English lavender plants that provide nectar for bees.

Coupled with chores for families to work together to care for their home, families must also participate in *acts of service* as a way to labor together outside the home. Caring for others outside the home teaches and reminds children and adults that one of the greatest missions of our faith is to serve a hurting world.<sup>36</sup> It is the truth Jesus pointed his followers to in Matthew 25—

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<sup>35</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Wigger, *The Power of God at Home*, 141.

The Judgment of All Nations. In this scene, he depicted people being divided into two groups—those who would be allowed to enter God’s Kingdom (sheep) and those who would be left out (goats). To everyone’s surprise, the criteria would be how well they each took care of others; specifically, the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, and stranger (Matt 25:31-46).

*Acts of service* that give families a shared opportunity to serve others outside the home reinforce for each member that their call is bigger than their own family. Most congregations provide families opportunities to engage in this kind of communal work, such as serving lunch or dinner at a homeless shelter, providing Christmas gifts for families experiencing financial hardship, helping to organize the garments at a local clothes closet, or building a ramp for someone who can no longer use their front steps to access their home.

But *acts of service* must extend further than church events; they must be a way of life. Kids can learn that speaking up for a classmate who’s getting bullied is an act of justice, sitting with the new kid who’s alone at lunch is an act of compassion, and helping a peer who’s struggling with a particular subject or concept rather than competing against them is an act of love. Being formed by our faith in Christ requires us to participate in the mission of Christ, which continually reaches out in service to others. We cannot faithfully love God without consistently loving neighbor, and loving our neighbors includes finding opportunities to serve them.

### **Shared Experiences**

Since relationships are built on shared experiences, families must be intentional in creating meaningful *shared experiences* together. Children and teenagers need their parents to experience both play and Sabbath with them, and parents need these shared experiences with their children. For children, this will involve parents making space to join them in imaginative

play where new worlds are created and everyday objects like boxes are transformed into spaceships. As children get older, play will look different as parents cultivate space for their teenagers to discover hobbies they enjoy and make time to join them in those activities.<sup>37</sup> However, parents must be careful to ensure that the activities chosen do not become performance-based and achievement-focused, as is often the case with sports and music. Too often parents use these extracurricular activities to focus on finding or developing a certain skill.<sup>38</sup> When performance-based hobbies become the activity adolescents want to share, parents must be sure to affirm effort over performance, character growth over achievement.<sup>39</sup> The point is for families to foster stronger relationships with one another and build identity through enjoyable *shared experiences*.

One of the most important experiences families can share is the Sabbath. Just as the command to work can be traced back to the beginning of humanity, so too can Sabbath rest—"On the sixth day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done" (Gen 2:2). Sabbath was not simply an exercise that God practiced within Godself, God later commanded his people to do likewise in the fourth of his Ten Commandments—"But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work" (Ex 20:10a). Cultivating Sabbath rest in our homes keeps us in sync with the weekly rhythm of work and rest that God modeled and ordained. Sabbath reminds us that there is more to life than our own striving can accomplish; it is an opportunity to "model the truth of our salvation in real life—we can rest because God has done his good work."<sup>40</sup> Sabbath reminds us

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<sup>37</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 169.

<sup>38</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 63.

<sup>39</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> Earley, *Habits of the Household*, 171.

that just as we are incapable of reconciling ourselves to God through the law, we are also unable to fully restore ourselves. True restoration can only come from God (Matt 11:28-30).

Sabbath keeping also helps to cultivate obedience and restraint. As the Exodus story of manna in the wilderness reveals, food was the litmus test for Israel's obedience to God.<sup>41</sup> Would they gather extra food for themselves or obey God by showing restraint, gathering only what they needed for the day and trusting that God would provide for their needs tomorrow? Their decision to gather more revealed that even though they were free people in the wilderness, they were still enslaved to the Pharaonic way of life in Egypt. This corporate view of the world and all creation continues to plague God's people today. Food, among other resources, is viewed as a product to consume rather than a gift to nurture.<sup>42</sup> Sabbath keeping reorients families and churches to see the earth as God's creation—"a complex harmony orchestrated by God, where every creature, including humans, can rest in the goodness of the whole."<sup>43</sup>

Along with obedience and restraint, Sabbath rest also has economic implications that center on love for God, neighbor, and creation. Instead of working to hoard and consume more, Sabbath reminds us that we have a responsibility to live in a way that does not continue to deplete the world's resources for the most economically vulnerable today and future generations to come. Through Sabbath, the way of Jesus is cultivated through restraint, making concrete choices to care for creation, share with our neighbors, and trust that God will provide for our needs.

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<sup>41</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 70.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 75.

<sup>43</sup> Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*, 78.

## How to Begin in the Church

The best place for churches to begin thinking about equipping families for the work of faith formation at home is through the integration of intergenerational ministries. If one of the chief purposes of *a rule of life for home* is helping families ensure their identities are being formed by their faith, Roberto contends that “Intergenerational church culture forms and deepens Christian identity and commitment as people develop relationships and actively participate in faith communities that teach, model, and live the Christian tradition and way of life.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than starting from scratch, churches can begin to transform their multigenerational events and age-specific ministries into intergenerational ministries. If the program is age-specific for children or teenagers, churches can consider the following questions: How can adult mentors or spiritual guides be incorporated? How can senior adults be chaperones? How might teenagers teach an adult Sunday School series of lessons? How could children and teenagers consistently participate in leading congregational worship?<sup>45</sup> The goal is not to replace adults in worship with kids, but rather to ensure kids and adults are experiencing worship together.<sup>46</sup> As adults and children have more shared experiences as a larger community of faith, more integrational relationships can be built that create shared history and values, which, in turn, nurture Christian identity.

Along with transforming age-specific programs into intergenerational ministries, churches can also develop intergenerational rituals. Whether it’s providing children at transitional times with Bibles that contain notes from trusted, spiritual leaders in the congregation; taking rising middle-school students on a confirmation retreat with their parents

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<sup>44</sup> Roberto, *Lifelong Faith*, 46.

<sup>45</sup> Roberto, *Lifelong Faith*, 50-51.

<sup>46</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 116.

each year; hosting a junior-senior prom at the end of each school year with high school students and senior adults; developing a big-brother or big-sister relationship with the older youth and younger children of the church; or hosting an annual dinner where parents of young children share a meal with high-school seniors to learn from the teenagers what is most important about childhood, through rituals, churches can create opportunities for increasing adult-kid interaction in a way that produces the 5:1 ratio of adults to children, which creates sticky faith through a sticky web of meaningful Christian relationships.<sup>47</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Families will need a practical space to learn the *key* values, spiritual disciplines, and shared practices of *a rule of life for home*. In my context, I have offered this information to my congregation in two different formats: a weekly worship service and a small group. Both have provided benefits and limitations. The worship service has allowed the information to be shared with a larger group at one time; however, this format has lacked the dialogue families need to effectively engage with the material. On the other hand, the mid-week small group has required more time than some families can give to this process due to the discussion that accompanies the study. Some families need these practices to be taught in a shorter timeframe, so they still have enough time to fulfill all the other obligations of their week.

Either way, Christian relationships are what ultimately provide families the support and encouragement they need to lead faith formation in their homes. Rather than a *rule* being offered exclusively as a separate teaching, Roberto contends that churches must be intentional in providing “opportunities to equip homes as centers of faith formation at every stage of life.”<sup>48</sup> Equipping families to practice faith formation outside the walls of the church must be a part of

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<sup>47</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 118-119.

<sup>48</sup> Roberto, “Best Practices in Family Faith Formation,” 7.



every ministry of the church. Through ancient *rules*, monastic communities provided a concrete method for helping monks in this endeavor. By leading families to develop *a rule of life for home*, churches can similarly offer congregants a practical system for cultivating the values of their home that allows them to be formed by their Christian faith by living more fully in the way of Jesus.

## Conclusion

Hundreds of years before Jesus, it was Aristotle who sought to develop an accessible method for human flourishing. Though “happiness” was a hopeful outcome, he believed flourishing (or, a *life of excellence*) encompassed much more than a pleasant state of emotion; it was achieved by those who actually lived up to their full potential, “displaying a complete, rounded, wise, and thoroughly formed character.”<sup>1</sup> Experiencing life in this way could not be reached through the typical metrics of success that have captivated humanity since the beginning—wealth, power, prestige, notoriety, accumulation, and achievement. Aristotle and his followers recognized that something had to be transformed within the individual beyond these societal metrics in order to experience the fullness of life. They believed inner transformation was not only possible but a tangible reality for those who were willing to engage in the lifelong process of developing virtue.

Though Aristotle’s account of the virtues provides a helpful structure for discussing faith formation, the difference between the abundant life promised in Christ through the New Testament writers and the virtuous life espoused by Aristotle is like the difference between a three-dimensional model and a two-dimensional one. The method Aristotle proposed is the circle contained within the sphere of what Jesus offered.<sup>2</sup> Similar to Aristotle, what I have proposed in my thesis is an accessible method for living in the way of Jesus that allows Christians to experience the *life to the full* that Christ promised (Jn 10:10). Drawing from deep within the well of Christian tradition, I have used early monastic *rules* to crystalize the key Christian values that believers must cultivate in order to participate in the life and mission of Jesus. By examining the

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 35.

spiritual disciplines and shared practices of Augustine's and Benedict's *rules*, I have sought to provide concrete steps that must be habituated in the lives of believers in order to develop these values in a way that allows Christ to transform us from the inside out.

Experiencing the life Jesus promised is not about what we can achieve in ourselves, but rather what God is accomplishing in and through us. Cultivating Christian values through a commitment to personal and shared practices in a way that allows God to conform us to God's will is the process of faith formation. It is a way of living that helps us to stay connected to the vine by consistently making ourselves attentive and available to God. Through this process, we submit to God in such a way that allows him to release us from our self-focused and self-reliant fragments and find our deep center in him. We also develop a Christ-centered lens through which to interpret the avalanche of information that races toward us daily. And, above all, faith formation reminds us that we are more than what we can do, what we have, and what others say about us; we are beloved children of God. Thus, faith formation is about approaching God in humility and vulnerability, and entrusting our lives, families, churches, communities, and world to him.

This level of trust does not happen organically or haphazardly. It requires discipline, commitment, patience, and consistency in the place *that remains the primary source of faith and values*—the home. Faith formation at home is not a magic formula that justifies or sanctifies us, allows us to achieve salvation, heals our family of every wound, or protects our homes from the brokenness and tragedies that all families experience. Ultimately, *a rule of life for home* seeks to create and sustain our trust in God in a way that ensures God is the very matrix of our being—  
"the primary reality of a life engaged in an ever deepening union with God in love."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 19.

The more we trust God, the more we are able to experience God's love. The more we experience God's love, the more all creation can be shaped by his love. This is the goal of faith formation—living a life that is formed and shaped by our love for God, God's love for us, and our love for neighbor. Only in that love are we able to remain connected to the vine; “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16b).

Through a *rule*, families can ensure their home is formed by Christ and abides in his love, as God abides in them.

### **Reflections After Implementing *A Rule of Life for Home***

Implementing *a rule of life for home* has been transformative in my own home. One of the most chaotic and exhausting routines in my family has been the bedtime routine with our two boys, Carter, who is ten years old, and Parker, who is eight years old. Almost every night in the past, once it was time for them to take showers, put on pajamas, and brush their teeth, the craziness would begin. Rather than following through with the nightly tasks they are both more than capable of completing themselves, they would go upstairs and find anything else to do other than what we asked them to do—wrestle with each other, play chase with our dog, start looking at their school yearbook, draw a picture, or play with their Legos and action figures. Coupled with all of these distractions would be an inordinate amount of silliness and fussiness all at the same time. As a result, most nights would end with threats, chastisements, and punishments before everyone would finally go to bed quietly and orderly.

Though the nighttime routine can still be chaotic and silly, since we implemented the practice of *shared blessings* it has changed. Now, it ensures that no matter how crazy the journey may be to get to bed, everyone goes to sleep being reminded of how much we love each other. My wife Whitney and I have developed our own blessing to share with both of our sons each

night. While one of us shares our blessing with one son, the other shares their blessing with the other son and then we switch places. In response, our boys have developed their own shared blessing that they say to us each night. As a result, the last words our boys hear from us are words of affirmation and love. We assure them of our love for them and God's love for them.

The blessing I offer each one is as follows:

I want you to go to bed knowing that I love you more than words can say. God loves you more than you can ever imagine. So much so that he sent his Son, Jesus, to live for you, die for you, rise for you, and he promises to never leave you. I want you to know that we are so thankful for you, blessed by you, and proud of who you are. Rest tonight knowing just how incredibly special you are. You are a gift and I love you.

This practice has resulted in fewer interruptions during the night, such as when one of the boys wakes up and is unable to go back to sleep, as well as calmer mornings where both children wake up more content than they did before. These *shared blessings* have become a new normal in our home that our boys have come to expect that has changed the atmosphere and outcome of the bedtime routine. Rather than the goal being to go to bed quietly and orderly, these blessings ensure that we go to bed with the assurance of our love for one another and God's love for us.

Another practice at bedtime that has made a difference in our home is *shared devotions and prayer*. Once the boys have finished getting ready for bed, we gather as a family on one of their beds to read a devotion together and each offers a prayer. Though some nights continue to be silly and full of distractions, these devotions have created more God-talk in our home. The boys are now asking more questions about faith than they were before: If God did such great miracles in the Bible, why doesn't God do them today? Is the Devil real? Have you ever seen an angel? Why do some people not believe in God? Will we all be in heaven together one day?

Questions such as these were not being asked as frequently before *shared devotions* as they are today. These discussions have allowed our family to engage in God-talk in a way that

ensures our faith is part of the language and conversations of our home. To live as Christians, our boys must first learn how to speak as Christians.<sup>4</sup> *Shared devotions* have provided them an opportunity to learn the language of our faith within our home, as well as a safe space where asking questions and discussing our faith as a family is welcomed and celebrated.

There are many other changes that the shared practices of faith formation have made in our home. As a result of *shared prayers*, our boys have learned to pray differently. When we pray together as a family, Whitney and I have been intentional about including concerns about our world, community, and other families that need support in our prayers. This has changed the way our boys pray. Rather than simply thanking God for his blessings and petitioning God with their requests, they have begun to pray about the rising homeless population in our city, the people being hurt and displaced by the wars in Ukraine and Israel, the classmate whose parents are getting divorced, or the church member who is in the hospital. Through *shared family prayers*, our boys' petitions to God have become much more outwardly focused, which has given our family opportunities to discuss how we too can work for justice to help those for whom they prayed.

The continued emphasis on *shared meals* has provided space for closer relationships. Whitney and I know the names of our children's friends, the school subjects they struggle with the most, the games they play at recess, and the funny moments that happen in the lunchroom. Along with closer bonds and stronger relationships with one another, we have begun to light a candle at every meal and declare together, "God is with us." This has allowed all of us to remember that God is part of everything we do as a family, not just when we go to church. The candle itself has opened the door for more God-talk with questions such as, Why do we light a

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<sup>4</sup> Freeman, *Pilgrim Journey*, xiv.

candle for God? Is God really at the table in the same way as the candle? Why doesn't God speak if God is with us? Through one simple addition to our table—a candle—more faith conversations have occurred.

Starting each meal with *God be with us* has also changed the mood at the dinner table. Rather than the focus being on the food and how fast the boys can finish eating and go back outside to play, they have begun to slow down and engage more with our conversations as a family. Before this practice, Whitney and I had to stretch and pull for every detail. Now, though sometimes still silly and distracted, they volunteer more information and talk more about the details of their days at school.

Faith formation at home has not changed our home overnight, but my family has been able to see distinct differences since instituting the shared practices of *a rule of life for home*. These changes have not perfected our home or the relationships of our family. We still get angry and frustrated with each other; we still have to apologize for things we say that should not have been said; and we still can become overly scheduled, self-focused, and achievement-based. However, these practices have given us a new awareness of these dynamics, a greater appreciation for each other, and a renewed desire to ensure our faith in Christ and participation in his mission is what is ultimately forming our lives, our relationships, and our home.

### **Where to Begin**

Though the values, disciplines, and practices I have offered that make up *a rule of life for home* are not exhaustive, they are extensive. In the everyday busyness and weekly commitments that overwhelm and exhaust many families, applying these practices to the home may seem like an impossibility. However, a marathon is an impossibility for someone who has never trained. We cannot just decide to run 26.2 miles at one time without any practice and complete the

journey. Most marathoners start by completing one mile. If they have never run before, they may begin by walking one mile. Over time, they will introduce their body to running and slowly extend the distance of their run as their muscles strengthen and endurance builds. Becoming a marathon runner is a process that takes months (even years) of practice to accomplish. The key is to start small and remain consistent.

Unlike a marathon, *a rule of life for home* is not a goal to achieve; it is a slow process that we cannot effectively implement into our homes all at once. I recommend that the adults of the home begin by committing to one spiritual discipline and shared practice with the family. Though all the spiritual disciplines discussed in Chapter Four are beneficial, I would suggest that making time for silence and solitude with God every day is the best place to begin. As Barton contends, the depth of each person's Christian formation will often be determined by their commitment to silence and solitude—the space where we settle ourselves into God's presence.<sup>5</sup> Before we can be addressed by the *written* Word of God, we must develop an attentiveness to the *living* Word of God. Without this attentiveness, all of the other spiritual disciplines—Scripture reading, prayer, worship—can become self-focused and self-serving. Through a commitment to journey inward, we make ourselves available to God to be conformed to his will.

As parents begin with the personal discipline of silence and solitude, the family can begin with the *keystone* habit of *shared meals*. If committing to five shared meals a week is too much, families could at least start with three. Whenever these meals occur, the family must agree to eliminate all other distractions by gathering around a table and focusing solely on the food and conversation shared between them. As these weekly meals connect them to each other, create conversation, and build relationships, families may also utilize that time to introduce practices

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<sup>5</sup> Barton, *Strengthening the Soul*, 41.



such as *shared blessings, shared meaningful conversations, shared devotions and prayers*, and even *shared experiences* by experimenting with different foods and locations for the mealtime.

However the family chooses to introduce *a rule of life for home*, the key is to start small and stay consistent. Over time, they can introduce additional practices and slowly extend the spiritual muscles of their home as their strength and endurance build. Through these practices, the hope is that families can begin to *cultivate a culture* in their home around the values of a *rule*—love, humility, restraint, hospitality, and obedience. Through these values, families can begin to *cultivate a people* who speak and live as Christians, ultimately being formed by their faith as they participate in the life, death, resurrection, and mission of Christ wherever they go.

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## Biography

The Rev. Travis Russell is currently the senior pastor of Vinton Baptist Church in Vinton, VA. He previously served churches in Reidsville, NC, Whiteville, NC, and Graham, NC. Travis graduated summa cum laude from UNC Greensboro with a Bachelor of Science in education. He received his Master of Divinity from Campbell University Divinity School with languages and distinction, including a concentration in pastoral care. He also completed his CPE residency certification from Alamance Regional Medical Center where he served as a chaplain. Travis was licensed and ordained as a minister of the gospel by First Baptist Church of Elon, NC.

As a pastor, Travis seeks to cultivate a community of faith that is Christ-centered, biblically based, and ministry-focused. He believes the church is not a place, but a people who gather to participate in the life, death, resurrection, and mission of Christ. By obeying Jesus' Great Commandment and following his Great Commission, Travis seeks to make disciples who *do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.*

Travis's greatest joy in life is his family. Travis and his wife, Whitney, met at Campbell University Divinity School, and have two sons, Carter and Parker, and an Aussiedoodle named Ozzie. Travis and Whitney love taking trips as a family, competing over ACC basketball, and watching Carter and Parker laugh and grow. During any spare time, Travis enjoys making furniture pieces, playing golf, hiking, and eating lemon desserts.