Professional Project Proposal:

Resisting Cultural Formation in a Technological Age by Reclaiming Home Discipleship

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Nature of the Ministry Problem

"On average, children ages 8-12 in the United States spend 4-6 hours a day watching or using screens, and teens spend up to 9 hours."[1] This statement, made by the *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, provides a concerning statistic that the American church needs to address. There are a multitude of voices, both inside and outside of the church, who are sounding an alarm at the epidemic that some are calling "an obsession or compulsion, if not a full-blown addiction."[2] This new trend warrants an analysis, and if found necessary, an adjustment in the way in which the church disciples its people.

The risk of enculturation has always been a struggle for the people of God. However, the unrestrained access to the voice of the world through modern technological advancements presents an unparalleled formative avenue for a culture that is increasingly antagonistic towards Christianity. This presents a significant problem for the discipling of saints into conformity with the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29).

The concern is more intricate than the advent of some new technological development. There have been philosophical and methodological shifts in what it means to be a disciple and how the church goes about making new disciples. While a fuller investigation would trace the roots of the discipleship problem to the Enlightenment period and would discuss the Downgrade Controversy that Charles Spurgeon zealously advocated against, a more focused analysis of the

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[1] "Screen Time and Children," accessed September 17, 2021, https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Watching-TV-054.aspx.

[2] Meredith E. David, James A. Roberts, and Brett Christenson, "Too Much of a Good Thing: Investigating the Association between Actual Smartphone Use and Individual Well-Being," *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 34, no. 3 (March 2018): 265–275, accessed September 17, 2021, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=127698820&site=ehost-live.

past century would highlight the ecclesiological trends that brought about movements such as the self-attesting theologically shallow, seeker-sensitive movement promoted by Willow Creek.[3]

The ecclesiological shifts that occurred over the past century involve the rise of the megachurch, the mindset of "church shopping" and churchgoer as "consumer," and pastor as an organizational leader. These philosophical transitions have had a significant impact on how to make disciples and what it means to be a disciple. The unfortunate results appear to indicate that Christians are less resilient and less Biblically informed than what is necessary to withstand the shifting sands of the culture that is increasingly post-Christian. Barna reports that over the past decade, those who identify as Christians have declined, those who attend church service have declined, Bible reading has declined, and prayer has declined.[4]

These shifts have produced a program-centric discipleship model that, oftentimes, is oriented around the metrics of numbers and budgets as the gauge for success. However, the declining statistics concerning disciples suggest that the strategy of the church may need to be reconsidered. Ron Hunter believes that it is a fair estimation that most teens receive only one hour of Biblical formation out of one-hundred sixty-eight in a week.[5] Jay Strother references studies that found that the average teenager who is committed to regular worship receives

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[3] See Albert Mohler, "The Strange Tale of Robert Shuller and the Crystal Cathedral: A Conversation with Sociologists Mark T. Mulder and Gerardo Marti," Thinking in Public, n.d. and Mike Cosper, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill: Boomers, The Big Sort, and Really, Really Big Churches," n.d. for an expanded analysis of the development of the trends that resulted in the current state of the church. Regarding Willow Creek's observation that their discipleship model was producing "shallow" Christians, see Mark Branaugh, "Willow Creek's 'Huge Shift': Influential Megachurch Moves Away from Seeker-Sensitive Services," *Christianity Today* 52, no. 6 (June 2008): 13–13, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001661048&site=ehost-live.

[4] "Signs of Decline & Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith," *Barna Group*, accessed September 20, 2021, https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/.

[5] Ron Jr. Hunter, *The DNA of D6: Building Blocks of Generational Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2015), 9.

approximately forty hours of Bible teaching per year, while parents have an opportunity to form their children for approximately three thousand hours per year.[6]

Spiritual formation that is centered on church programs that are held within the walls of the building is dwarfed in comparison to the number of hours of cultural formation through secular media via technology such as smartphones. The relationships of the home seem to have the best opportunity to compete with the cultural influence. However, it will take the strategic equipping of the church to prepare families for successful home discipleship.

This present study seeks to determine the impact of technology upon Christian homes and the efficacy of current, prevalent discipleship strategies in developing resilient followers of Christ in an increasingly technological age. It is hypothesized that the American church will need to reconsider its discipleship methodology in order to equip homes to holistically integrate faith into the believer's life through the leadership of heads of homes. As pastor of family and student discipleship at Lakewood Park Ministries, this research will inform the programming and efforts of the church so that the most effective discipleship strategy may be employed in the current milieu.

Biblical and Theological Issues

The dilemma of discipleship methodology in the present context can feel perplexing and discouraging to the local pastor. The American church has enjoyed a long season of majority support and social affirmation, such as the Blue Laws, but America seems to be making a more resolute pivot away from Christianity. It is for this reason that truths of Scriptures must remind pastors that the people of God have been in this position before and inform pastors of the stratagem of God in training up the next generation of disciples.

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[6] Paul Renfro, Brandon Shields, and Jay Strother, *Perspectives on Family Ministry: 3 Views*, ed. Timothy Paul Jones (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 169–170.

The Temptation of Enculturation

Throughout the history of God's people, there has been the temptation to conform to the image of the world rather than the image of God. The inauguration of this rebellion stems back to Genesis 3, in which Adam and Eve believe the lie of the serpent that there is another path of wisdom that can produce equality with God (Gen. 3:1-7). The downward spiral of humanity continues culminating in the catastrophic annihilation of all but one family (Gen. 6-7). However, the sin condition would abide in mankind even after the flood. Once again, man would display his wickedness in the collective effort to ascend to the heavens through the construction of the Tower of Babel— which would result in the dispersion and confusion of human clans (Gen. 11).

From this point on in the Biblical narrative, God calls out a people for His own— the line of Abraham. This family, which would grow to be a nation, would become situated amongst peoples who did not know or fear God and would entice Israel towards their ways. Numerous passages could be cited in defense of this claim; however, only a sample will be analyzed.

After God defends Israel against the attempted cursing of Balaam, Israel "began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people of the sacrifices to their gods and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So, Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor" (Num. 25:1-3). Later, as Israel took the Promised Land, Joshua would commission the elders of the people to choose whether they would serve the gods of the present land, the gods of Egypt, or the Lord God. Yet, only a generation later and the people did not know the Lord or what He had done and worshiped the Baals of surrounding nations (Judges 2:10-11). Not long after, Israel demands a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5). This motif of turning aside from worship of the one true God through the temptation of cultural assimilation continues on as a primary concern of God with Israel articulated in the prophets (Is. 57; Jer. 44; Ez. 23; Zech. 13; et al.)

The Theme of Family Worship

The risk of enculturation is pervasive. However, God designed a way for His people to resist the cultural formation of the world around them— the family. Throughout the Scriptures, there is the call for fathers to train up their children in the knowledge and fear of the Lord. The Scriptures repeat the commission of heads of families to lead their homes in the worship of the Lord. This is not to the exclusion of the larger, corporate people of God— rather, the family of God and the nuclear family play complementary roles in resisting worldly formation.

The culture of the ancient world assumes much of the paradigm presently being espoused. In a patriarchal society, the role and voice of the father was an unchallenged authority. However, in the current society, individualism and autonomy are the prized values of the day. Yet, even with the assumed responsibility of fathers to train their children, the Bible repeatedly admonishes this role.

One of the passages cited by many proponents of family discipleship is Deuteronomy 6. In this passage, the sacred *Shema*, the repeated declaratory prayer of Israel, is recorded. Immediately following is the command to "teach your children" while sitting at home or walking by the way (Deut. 6:4-8). As the passage continues, God supplies the rationale for fathers to constantly be training their children as He states, "[T]ake care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery… You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you" (Deut. 6:12-14). In an *inclusio* form, the passage returns to the importance of fathers training their sons, as it says, "When your son asks you in the time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?'" (Deut. 6:20). In response to their sons' question,

fathers are to recount the deliverance of God and what He requires of them. The way in which Israel was to resist pagan assimilation was through the constant training of the fathers.

Much more could be supplemented to the argument from Deuteronomy 6. The wisdom of Solomon was originally the training of a father to his son (Prov. 1:8, 10; 2:1; 3:1, 11; 4:1, 10, 20; 5:1; 6:1, 20; 7:1). The New Testament reaffirms the vital role of fathers in leading their homes as examples display the father's conversion leading to the conversion of the family (Acts 16:31; 18:8). Paul exhorts fathers to "not provoke [their] children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). When the spiritual leadership of fathers is not present, then the family of God is to step into the void and operate as "spiritual fathers" (3 Jn. 4). Heads of homes, along with the family of God, are to partner together in rearing disciples who are resilient against cultural formation.

Extra-Biblical Issues and Resources

Resources covering three primary areas of inspection will need to be utilized in the present investigation. The first is research on the impact of technological advances upon human functioning. The second is an analysis of the efficacy of recent discipleship models in producing resilient disciples. The third area of inspection will be the resurgence of family-oriented ministry. These three key areas of focus will inform whether the present hypothesis is accurate and how to appropriately respond to the findings.

Research on the Impact of Technology

Regarding the impact of technology on human functioning, numerous behavioral science journals are producing studies and research. The *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry,* along with various universities, are conducting research into the impact of technology on children and adults. Surveying these findings will be essential in constructing a

proper assessment of the ways in which technology is affecting humans. Additionally, *Barna Research* will contribute data specifically oriented towards the impact technology has on Christians. The following resources are pertinent to the subject as well.

Comer, John Mark. *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World*. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2019.

Comer's work is a thorough analysis concerning the lifestyle of the average American. He discusses pace, busyness, *and* the impact of continuous connectedness. Not only does he develop a diagnosis of the problem, but he also presents a way of reviving health through the practice of spiritual disciplines.

Challies, Tim. *The Next Story: Life and Faith After the Digital Explosion*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011.

Challies' book was written the year that smartphones entered into the pockets of half of the adult population. His initial assessment concerning the impact of the digital advancements happening provides a helpful framework for understanding and responding to this pivotal cultural and historical shift.

Reinke, Tony. *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017.

Reinke, Tony. *Competing Spectacles: Treasuring Christ in the Media Age*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

Tony Reinke has been at the forefront of considering the impact of technology upon Christians. *Competing Spectacles* provides a theological/philosophical framework for consideration. *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* is a practical guide to subtle shifts that technology is having and how to resist them.

Analysis of Prevalent Models of Discipleship

The world seeks to disciple and form humans into a particular image; however, the church is also tasked with the formation of humans— formation into the image of Christ. The technique of spiritual formation has evolved over the history of the church into the present state. However, in the wake of large-scale cultural shifts, the church must reconsider how to best disciple its people. The following resources acknowledge the need for considering discipleship methodology.

Bolsinger, Tod. *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015.

Canoeing the Mountains is a book on church leadership. What is unique about Bolsinger's work is that he is acutely aware of the ways in which leadership needs to shift in light of cultural trends. His book is helpful for pastors who are attempting to lead in the current milieu and are recognizing the past strategies will not have the same effect.

Cosper, Mike. "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill: Boomers, The Big Sort, and Really, Really Big Churches," 2021.

Cosper is the host of this podcast produced by *Christianity Today*. The primary analysis is focused on Mars Hill Church— its bombastic rise in fame and its public downfall. While the focus is on Mark Driscoll, he serves as an example of the culture of the American church that propelled him into fame. The particular episode cited above is especially helpful in developing the historical trends that manifested in the megachurch and the celebrity pastor phenomenon.

Gibbs, Eddie. *Churchmorph: How Megatrends Are Reshaping Christian Communities*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.

Gibbs is an insightful church theorist who has compiled a well-researched book on the trends of the American church in the past and the trends that the church is taking into the future.

The philosophical trends that Gibbs identifies have clear implications for the church's definition and strategy for discipleship.

Hansen, Collin, ed. *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor*. Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017.

Hansen has edited a compilation of commentators on the work of Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor traced the trends that began with the sacred/secular divide that arose out of the Reformation and hypothesized the end result of these trends that would emerge in the near future. Topics such as church shopping, navigating the public sector as a believer, and emphases on art and liturgy in Protestantism help to assess the present condition of Christianity.

Kinnaman, David. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church and Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.

Lyons, Gabe. *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America*. New York, NY: Doubleday Religion, 2010.

Kinnaman and Lyons, writing within a year of one another, write separate but similar books addressing the movement towards a post-Christian America. Kinnaman focuses on the increasing trend of teens and young adults leaving the church, while Lyons considers the frustrations many Christians have with the organization of the church. The two books, together, provide a helpful understanding of issues that are deterring people from the church.

Resources on Family-Oriented Ministry

In tandem with the increasing consensus of many church leaders recognizing that discipleship needs reconsidered is the resurgent emphasis upon family ministry. The impact of the individualistic and fast-paced culture is kindling a focus on family health. Various parachurch ministries are supplying data and resources to equip homes to be discipleship-minded, such as D6, Rooted Ministry, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's, *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry*. Specific resources on this topic are listed below.

Chandler, Matt, and Adam Griffin. *Family Discipleship: Leading Your Home through Time, Moments, and Milestones*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020.

Chandler and Griffin have developed a highly practical guide towards cultivating a discipleship method within the home. As pastors, this book is instructional concerning the equipping of parents to be the primary disciplers of their children.

Lopes, Jerrad. *Dad Tired and Loving It: Stumbling Your Way to Spiritual Leadership*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2019.

Dad Tired is a ministry that began as a podcast for fathers, became a book, and is now a national conference. With a global reach, this ministry is geared towards highlighting specific difficulties that fathers face while encouraging and equipping them to lead and love their families well.

McGarry, Michael. *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry: Teenagers in the Life of the Church*. Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2019.

McGarry's book, which is the product of his doctoral project, is a unique analysis of youth ministry in Scripture, throughout church history, and into its present form. While the book endorses youth ministry, it emphasizes the primacy of the parental role in discipleship and considers how youth ministry can support and supplement the family.

Pryor, Jeremy. *Family Revision: How Ancient Wisdom Can Heal the Modern Family*. Cincinnati, OH: Family Teams, 2019.

Pryor is the founder of Family Teams, a ministry designed to train families for discipleship. Drawing from historic Jewish paradigms and practices, pertaining to family structure, Pryor promotes countering the current context through implementing an ancient culture.

Tyson, Jon. *The Intentional Father: A Practical Guide to Raise Sons of Courage and Character*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021.

Tyson's book is a condensing of his fatherhood training program called, *The Primal Path*. While the book is specific towards fathers raising sons, Tyson notes a number of overlaps with raising daughters as well. This book partnered with Barna to provide numerous statistics on Christian fathers and all fathers in America. The data reinforces the program of the author in a compelling way.

Methodology, Procedures, and Evaluation Measurements

The dilemma under investigation is the apparent malformation of Christians in America. It is hypothesized that there are two significant factors that are perpetuating this trend. The first is that the technological advances of our century are forming the minds and hearts of Christians at a rate exponentially greater than what history has seen. The second is that the American church has adopted a program-centric discipleship model that has, in varying degrees, subverted the responsibility of family discipleship. Thus, the present question at hand is as follows: Is the dominant discipleship model in American Christianity, which is the current model of Lakewood Park Ministries, adequate to produce resilient disciples in this technological age?

The method of investigation will be surveying pastors and church leaders. The instruments for surveying pastors will be to utilize the research data collected by Barna Research at a national level. For local assessment, surveys will be electronically delivered to one hundred pastors and church leaders in northeast Indiana. Finally, phone or in-person interviews will be conducted with twenty pastors in Allen County or Dekalb County, Indiana.

The questions that will be asked in the local survey to pastors will include: a binomial question, do you believe you are producing resilient Christians with your current discipleship model? A Likert scale will be used for pastors to respond to the statement, "I believe that technology is adversely affecting the spiritual health of my people." A Likert scale will be used

for pastors to respond to the statement, "I believe that the discipleship methodology of the American church needs to be reassessed." A Likert scale will be used for pastors to respond to the statement, "I believe that the current discipleship model in my church is effectively equipping my people to be faithful and resilient disciples. A Likert scale will be used for pastors to respond to the statement, "Our church effectively equips families for discipleship in the home."

The following short answer questions will be asked of the pastors as well. What is your strategy for discipleship? What programs do you offer in a typical year? What are the prevailing struggles your people are facing? Do you believe your average regular attendee or member is spiritually mature, and how do you come to that conclusion? Do you believe that the marriages in your church are spiritually healthy? Do you believe that your regular attenders or members are actively engaged in the discipleship of their children? Are there any ways in which your leadership team is considering changing an existing discipleship method or initiating a new discipleship method? Do you believe that smartphones are negatively impacting the spiritual health of your people? Do you believe that social media is negatively impacting the spiritual health of your people?

In addition to surveying local pastors, three churches will be asked to email a survey to their regular attenders and members. The first church is Lakewood Park Ministries, the researcher's ministry context. The other two churches will be local churches— one that is larger than Lakewood Park, approximately one thousand in attendance, and one that is smaller than Lakewood Park, approximately one hundred in attendance. The survey will be responded to anonymously, though the church that the respondent attends will be noted.

The questions that will be asked on the survey to the local, regular attenders and members of the respective churches will be as follows. On average, how many hours are you at church or a church-related function in a week? On average, how many hours are you on your phone or a screen on a given day? Are you satisfied with your spiritual maturity? What spiritual practices do you partake in with those who live in your home? How much time do you spend in a week engaging in spiritually intentional practices? Do you believe that your use of technology is helping or hurting your relationship with God? Do you believe that the use of technology by those in your home is helping or hurting their relationship with God? Do you believe your church is adequately equipping you to live out the Christian life?

From the collected responses, an assessment will be determined concerning the spiritual health and resilience felt by Christians and observed by pastors in their current discipleship model. It will reveal the perception of technology's impact on spiritual health. Finally, it will indicate how pastors are equipping families and the degree to which families are engaging in spiritual practices within their homes.

Intended Outcome and Potential Benefits

The intended outcome of this project is to acquire an understanding of the impact of current cultural shifts upon Christianity in America and how the church can better equip disciples to stand firm in faithfulness. From this understanding, the discipleship model present at Lakewood Park will be assessed and, if the hypothesis is accurate, it will be restructured to enhance the spiritual health of homes by promoting and equipping family-based discipleship.

A potential benefit will be stronger and healthier family structures, where currently there seems to be deterioration. Further, it is hoped that a healthier and more disciplined relationship with technology will be developed and held to account by the proximity of family relationships.

Finally, it is hoped that the shift from the program-centric model to the family-centric model of discipleship will elicit a paradigm shift amongst Christians from "consumer" to "participant" as it pertains to involvement in the family of God.

As was discussed above, enculturation is a constant temptation to the people of God, and modern technology has provided a new strategy of worldly formation. However, God has designed family units to be microcosms of the larger family of God— smaller houses of worship. Past discipleship models have neglected an emphasis on that design, and now the church must reconsider its investment in equipping *the saints* for the work of ministry— starting in their own homes. This project intends to address this problem.

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