

ANCIENT-FUTURE FAITH SERIES

ANCIENT-FUTURE EVANGELISM

Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community

ROBERT E. WEBBER



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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANCIENT-FUTURE FAITH SERIES

In each book of the Ancient-Future Faith series I will present an issue related to faith and Christian practice from a particular point of view—that of drawing wisdom from the past and translating these insights into the present and future life of the church, its faith, worship, ministry, and spirituality. In these books I address current issues in the context of three very significant quests taking place in the church today.

First, these books speak to the longing to discover the roots of the faith in the biblical and classical tradition of the church. I affirm the Bible as the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. However, instead of disregarding the developments of faith in the church, I draw on the foundational interpretation of the church fathers and the creeds and practices of the ancient church. These are sources in which Christian truth has been summarized and articulated to expose and defend against heretical teaching.

Second, this series is committed to the current search for connection to history. Therefore, I draw from the entire history of the church together with its many manifestations—orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—particularly the Reformers and evangelicals like John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards. Valuable insights from these traditions are woven into the text, so the reader will understand how deeply committed Christians from various traditions have sought to think and live the faith in other places and times. From them we gain great wisdom.

Finally, I regard these insights and practices from the biblical tradition, ancient roots, and Christian history to constitute the foundation for addressing the third issue faced by today's church: How do you deliver an authentic faith into the new cultural situation of the twenty-first century? How do you carry the great wisdom of the past into a postmodern and post-Christian world? The way into the future, I argue,

is not innovation or a new start for the church. Rather, the road to the future runs through the past.

These three—roots, connection to history, and authenticity—will help us maintain continuity with historic Christianity as the church moves forward in a changing world. I hope what I cull from the past and then translate and adapt into the present will be of benefit to your ministry in a postmodern, post-Christian world.¹

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First, I need to thank Northern Seminary for my appointment as the William and Geraldine Myers Professor of Ministry. This generous chair has substantially reduced my teaching load, allowing me more time to write. I am equally grateful to Baker Books and especially to Robert Hosack for the support given to this series and for the freedom they have given me to develop this book in a way that reflects my convictions.

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INTRODUCTION

In September 1999, 450 church leaders from fifty-four countries and nearly ninety Christian fellowships and denominations met in Eastbourne, England, for the International Consultation on Discipleship to discuss a burning issue. The question they addressed is one that every pastor and congregation in the world has faced. How can our evangelism produce not only converts but disciples who grow in faith and become active members of the church?

In a published document entitled “The International Consultation on Discipleship,” the authors acknowledged:

- “Many converts to Christianity throughout the world fall away from faith.”
- The church is “marked by a paradox of growth without depth.”
- “Many within the church are not living lives of biblical purity, integrity and holiness.”¹

In addressing the participants of the International Consultation on Discipleship, John Stott said that evangelicals have “experienced enormous statistical growth . . . without corresponding growth in discipleship.”² African theologian Tokunboh Adeyemo lamented that the church “is one mile long, but only one inch deep.”³

So, what are Christian leaders to do? To begin, declares the conference manifesto, the Great Commission is not only to evangelize but to *make disciples*. The document defines discipleship as “a process that takes place within accountable relationships over a period of time for the purpose of bringing believers to spiritual maturity in Christ.”⁴

Note three very crucial insights for evangelism that result in discipleship:

- Evangelism is a process.
- Evangelism takes place over a period of time.
- Evangelism brings new believers to spiritual maturity.

To accomplish these goals, the conferees called Christians to recover the integral relationship between evangelism and discipleship, to assess rigorously existing structures, to recognize the local church as the primary community in which discipleship takes place, to affirm the vital role of mentoring, to rediscover the role of the Holy Spirit as teacher, and to call all Christians to live as “subjects in the kingdom of God.”⁵

David Neff, an editor of *Christianity Today*, commented on the International Consultation. “Now that the consultation has placed disciple-making higher on the global evangelical agenda, it is vital that our biblical scholars, theologians, and spiritual guides develop for us a full-orbed vision of the life of the disciple.”⁶ *Ancient-Future Evangelism* is a response to this challenge. I come to this question, not out of my own imagination or ingenuity, but from an approach to evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation rooted in Scripture, attested to in the history of the church, and authentic to the post-Christian world in which we live.

In chapter 1, I provide a survey of how Christians have been evangelized and formed as disciples throughout the centuries. This overview leads the reader directly to part 1, “The Process of Christian Formation,” in which I present the process of the faith-forming church by discussing the four stages of growth and spiritual maturation developed by the ancient church.

Chapter 2 looks specifically at the development of the process of Christian formation in the ancient church. In chapters 3 through 6, I translate the ancient process into the task of making disciples in our post-Christian world.

In chapter 3, I show how the church may evangelize in today’s world, commenting on how evangelism occurs by way of a community that lives out the message. In this way, involvement with the church is the context in which the seeker first experiences the message as a lived reality. Then, in the worship of the church, the message of Jesus is preached and enacted. Evangelism occurs as the seeker surrenders to Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. Faith is formed in the church and through its worship. Initial Christian formation has begun. A passage rite transfers the new convert into the next stage.

The second stage of faith formation is initial discipleship (chapter 4). Through discipleship the new believer is brought into a deeper knowledge of his or her relationship with Jesus Christ. In this stage the new believer learns more about what it means to be a part of the church and a worshiper. The new convert is taught disciplines of the Spirit that bring depth to his or her spiritual commitment. Another passage rite moves the new disciple into the next stage.

In the third stage of faith formation, the new convert is introduced to the spiritual life (chapter 5). New Christians are taught that spirituality

is a gift. Baptism is the image of the gift. Having been baptized into his death, Christians are called to die to sin. Having been baptized into his resurrection, Christians are called to live the new life in Christ by the Spirit. In this stage new Christians are taught how their own struggle to live the Christian life is a microcosm of the great battle with evil and how Jesus, who is the Victor over sin and death, is the one who by the power of the Spirit is present throughout their entire lives to help them deal with the powers of evil. A final passage rite moves the new Christian into deeper association with the church.

The final stage of initial faith formation, discussed in chapter 6, is instruction in vocation. All Christians are called to the vocation of living in their baptism. What does this mean in terms of one's gifting? How is a person to use his or her gifts in the church? How is a person to see work and vocation in the world as a service to God?

I am convinced that this approach to faith formation is applicable to Christian witness in every country around the world. While my application is to the North American culture in particular, the principles I cull from the ancient church are applicable worldwide—Europe, Africa, India, Asia, and Latin America. I challenge leaders from all countries and cultures of the world to take these biblical, ancient principles of evangelism and faith formation and translate them into their own culture. In this way we may serve the Great Commission and fulfill the challenge of the International Consultation on Discipleship to find a way not only to evangelize but to turn converts into lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ.

This fourfold process occurs over a six-month period. It has the advantage of giving the new Christian a strong start in the faith. This process should be seen as initial discipleship with the understanding that discipleship and growth in the Christian faith continues throughout life. This approach fulfills one of the goals of the International Consultation on Discipleship: "We will not water down the cost of discipleship in order to increase the number of converts. We acknowledge that part of making disciples is teaching people to obey everything that Jesus commanded."⁷ What I adapt from the ancient church will do just that. It initiates new converts into a lifelong process of growth. Also, if those who are already disciples will walk through the process, it will inspire a deeper walk of faith. In this way the entire congregation will continuously disciple the entire congregation.

In part 2, "Cultural and Theological Reflection," I ask the reader to think about the culture of our post-Christian world as the context in which the church does faith forming. Then I explore the classical understanding of the message of faith and the meaning of the church and of worship. I ask for a return to a more substantive grasp of the faith.

In chapter 7, I argue that our culture is like that of the first three centuries in which the church emerged. Therefore, we can no longer assume people have a basic grasp of the Christian faith. Consequently, the local church needs to return to basics. Today many people long for a spiritual experience, but this longing is largely a narcissistic desire, a “what’s in it for me” spirituality, an eclectic spirituality that chooses from this and that spiritual tradition to create a tailor-made spirituality (e.g., New Age spirituality).

Unfortunately, the predominant thought of the day regards Christianity as one more spirituality among many spiritualities. This spiritual relativism is so widespread that it is even being expressed in some churches. For example, I have a pastor friend whose daughter-in-law is a pastor. He tells me, “She loves Jesus, but she says, ‘That’s my way; others have their way that is equally valid.’” I argue that the uniqueness of Jesus Christ must be rediscovered as an essential feature of the Christian message. The very foundation of the Christian faith is “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

In chapters 8 and 9, I present three ancient theological themes that are woven into the fourfold process of faith formation. They are Christ as the Victor over the powers of evil, the church as the witness to God’s saving action through Jesus Christ, and worship as a witness to God’s mission accomplished in Jesus.

Note that I have placed the practice of making disciples first and the theological reflection second. This is in keeping with the principle that experience precedes reflection—an ancient principle that was reversed by modernity. Obviously, part 1 on practice contains theological reflection, and part 2 on cultural and theological reflection is relevant to the practical outworking of the process.

I urge you to begin with the practice. Don’t spend a lot of time trying to “figure out” ancient-future evangelism. Take whatever time you need to review the resources and solicit a small group of people in your church who simply will do ancient-future evangelism. As you proceed, spend more time with the reflective part (2) and read some of the books suggested in the bibliography. In due time the process will flow naturally, the entire congregation will become involved, and the church will grow in depth and numbers.

Making disciples according to this biblical and ancient process is no quick fix. It is, to use the phrase popularized by Eugene Peterson, “a long obedience in the same direction.” Eventually, and perhaps sooner than you think, the church will establish a rhythm in which the whole church disciples the whole church.



1

THE WAY NEW CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN FORMED

In a recent doctoral course, “Worship, Evangelism, and Nurture,” taught at Northern Seminary, I posed the following question: In the area of worship, evangelism, and nurture, what is your primary issue?

The seven students enrolled in the course were evangelical pastors from a broad variety of traditions—Free Methodist, African-American Baptist, United Church of Christ, Southern Baptist, Cumberland Presbyterian, an independent church, and Assemblies of God. The average age of these pastors was in the midforties; the average time in ministry was around twenty years. Remarkably, every one of these pastors pointed to a similar issue.

I asked for a one-sentence summary of the most significant problem they faced in ministry, and they wrote:

“Making real disciples is my primary issue.”

“I need to slow down the process to baptism to make sure conversions are real.”

“We enjoy a lot of Christian fellowship but have no sense of mission.”

“My choir members are there to do music but little else.”

“I need to move my people from low commitment to high commitment.”

“I need my people to see conversion as a process.”

“I need to get my people to real conversion and beyond.”

As the course proceeded, it became clear that each pastor faced two problems. First, the various ministries of the church—worship, evangelism, discipleship, spiritual formation, and assimilation into the church—were compartmentalized. In the larger churches each division of ministry was represented by a different pastor—one for evangelism, another for Christian education, a music or worship pastor, and so on, depending on the size of the church. A common complaint that emerged was that each pastor worked alone without a great deal of his or her ministry integrated with the other ministries of the church.

The second issue was very similar to that of the conferees at the International Consultation on Discipleship. Why are there so many converts but so few disciples? Why is our church a mile wide but only an inch deep? How can we encourage growth and maturity in the Christian faith?

The following two questions are central to this book:

1. How can we get beyond compartmentalized programs and move to ministry?
2. How can we form new converts into disciples?

With these two questions in mind, I will trace the way the church has handled Christian formation throughout its history. First, I will show how the ancient church became a faith-forming community as it brought evangelism, discipleship, and spirituality together in a unified process of faith formation. Second, I will show how this ancient process of formation fell apart over the centuries. By understanding this history, the reader will be put in a better position to understand why an ancient-future evangelism needs to be recovered today.

Christian Formation in the New Testament Church

The New Testament church exhibited a unity between evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation that provided a sequence of ministry. This ministry sequence moved new converts through stages of spiritual growth. Although the New Testament does not set forth a systematic and linear sequence of Christian formation in any great detail, here and there we see hints of early practices. Acts 2 contains several of these. Most obvious is the conversion process in “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Later, the laying on of hands is associated with receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 8: 14–17). Worship on the day of Pentecost apparently included a time of

instruction: “With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’” Then, “those who accepted his message were baptized” (Acts 2:40–41). The content of this message is quite clearly stated: “Save yourself from this corrupt generation,” but we are given no hint of the length of this instruction. Was it a paragraph or two containing a brief warning and instruction? Was it an instruction that took place over weeks or months? Paul refers to a pattern or form of teaching when to his readers in Rome he writes, “You wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted” (Rom. 6:17), but this would imply a delay of baptism. The example of the Ethiopian implies preparation in God’s truth, followed by conversion and immediate baptism. While the sequence in the New Testament is not absolutely clear, the following elements of a process do emerge:

- Hearing the gospel
- Repentance
- Instruction to flee the corrupt world
- Baptism (a passage rite)
- Reception of the Holy Spirit (signified by a rite)

The remaining portion of Acts is a picture of the early Christian community and its worship. What may be said about the Christian conversion and formation at this early date is that it included a change of heart and mind, rituals of Christian identification, instruction to flee the vices of the world, and a description of the Christian community and its worship.

It is clear from the Epistles that spiritual growth was expected of new Christians. The writer of Hebrews chides the community to which this letter is addressed: “Let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity” (Heb. 6:1). Interestingly, the writer identifies the following as elementary teachings: “not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment” (Heb. 6:1–2). These teachings sound similar to what surrounded entrance into the church at its very beginnings. Could this list refer to a body of knowledge and habits of life that are taught to young Christians in a process of spiritual formation?

In a 1940 study, Phillip Carrington, bishop of Quebec, England, claimed to have found a pattern in Ephesians, Colossians, James, and 1 Peter that stressed four points for all new Christians to observe. These four injunctions are summarized in the following phrases:

1. Wherefore putting off evil . . . (*Deponentes*)
2. Submit yourselves . . . (*Subjecti*)
3. Watch and pray . . . (*Vigilate*)
4. Resist the devil . . . (*Resistite*)¹

Carrington concludes that because these four themes rose up in four New Testament books and in the same sequence, “there must be a reason for this.” On the whole he concludes the vocabulary is “suggestive of a common catechetical tradition.”² His study points to the fact that New Testament communities were developing a process of Christian formation to lead converts into an increasingly deeper commitment to the faith. The underlying feature of the New Testament process of discipleship is its holism. Today, if you wish your church to become a faith-forming community, it is necessary to establish a continuity between ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual formation.

Hebraic Holism and the Unity of Christian Ministry

A number of years ago a group of evangelical Hebrew scholars challenged Christians to stop using the term *Old Testament*. I heard this first from Ron Allen, professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Dallas Theological Seminary. His point was that by calling the Hebrew Scripture “old,” we inadvertently regard it as passé and make it irrelevant to the Christian church. Allen and others called on evangelicals to recognize that, as Marvin Wilson writes, “the theology of the early church was Hebraic to its very heart.”³

One dynamic feature of Hebraic faith is its holism. Our Western world has been shaped primarily by Greek thought rather than Hebraic thought. Greek thought separates, divides, and sees things in parts, whereas Hebraic thought sees things as whole and continuous. For this reason, when we approach the Scriptures and then our ministry, we need to “undergo a kind of intellectual conversion.”⁴

Holism is an integration of faith and life. Faith is seen as a journey, a walk through all of life. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik says, “The Semites of Bible times did not simply *think* truth—they *experienced* truth. . . . We [Jews] are practical. We are more interested in discovering what God wants man to do than in describing God’s essence. . . . As a teacher, I never try to solve questions because most questions are unsolvable.”⁵

The Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament documents are full of the imagery of life as a spiritual journey, pilgrimage, or walk. Enoch and Noah “walked with God” (Gen. 5:24; 6:9). The prophet Amos pro-

claims that those who “act justly and . . . love mercy and . . . *walk humbly with your God*” (Micah 6:8, italics added) are the ones who please God. Walking with God is the way of faith, the way of wisdom, the way of righteousness.

One of the most intriguing stories of the New Testament is the Emmaus walk (Luke 24:13–35). Here Cleopas and his companion (probably his wife) walked with Jesus, who unpacked the Scripture so that their hearts “burned” within. He then revealed himself as they ate bread together so that “their eyes were opened and they recognized him.” They “got up and returned at once to Jerusalem” to tell the disciples gathered in the upper room that Christ was risen from the dead!

This New Testament story is thoroughly Jewish in the sense that it exhibits a holism. It’s a story, not a series of abstract propositions. It’s a walk, a journey that takes these disciples from despair to great joy. It is characterized by an unfolding from not knowing Jesus to encountering him in the Word and in breaking bread together to rushing forth to tell others. These walkers were seekers who became disciples and then became witnesses. The progressive elements of the story are one continuous stream of a deepening relationship with God, an awakening to faith and to their own ministry of being witnesses to the resurrection. In this journey they experienced a turning from dislocation to relocation in God—an apt image of the ministry we want to do in today’s world! This is the model of a sequential and holistic process of formation connected with worship.

The Great Commission

A second example of sequential and holistic formation is evident in the Great Commission: “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’” (Matt. 28:16–20).

Unfortunately, in the church today this passage has been lifted out of its context and given a life of its own. A proper interpretation of this passage places it back into its context of Matthew and the community to whom it was written.⁶ The Hebraic holism that Matthew assumes can be seen in three sets of injunctions: (1) “all authority in heaven and

on earth has been given to me”; (2) make disciples, baptize, and teach; and (3) “I am with you always.”

The phrase “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” places the making of disciples into the larger context of Christian truth. This includes the atonement, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Christ together with his lordship over all creation. It also encompasses the calling of the church to proclaim God’s accomplished mission now and in the future *eschaton*, when the mission of God is completed in the new heavens and the new earth.

In the second injunction—make disciples, baptize, and teach—the Hebraic sense of holistic continuousness is expressed. These are not three separate categories of spiritual formation but three aspects of the whole calling and mission of the disciples of Jesus. The word *disciple* is the true description of the follower of Jesus. The word appears seventy-three times in the Gospel of Matthew, forty-six times in Mark, and thirty-seven times in Luke. The word itself means “to follow after,” which implies the Hebraic concept of journey and walk. New disciples are to be modeled on the first disciples of Jesus, who were modeled after Jesus.

Matthew’s concerns are both pastoral and missionary—“pastoral in that he holds up the first disciples as models for his own community as ideals to emulate, missionary in that he urges his community to ‘make disciples’ who should resemble the first ones.”⁷ Making disciples is clearly the overarching commission with baptism and teaching as part of the overall process. For Matthew, teaching is not divorced from disciple making; it is not a separate responsibility apart from discipleship, and teaching does not mean a mere intellectual framework. Instead, teaching “is a call for a concrete decision to follow him (Jesus) and submit to God’s will.”⁸ “To ‘believe,’ to ‘follow Jesus,’ to ‘understand’ all contain an element of active commitment that flows into deeds.”⁹ The heart of discipleship in Matthew’s Gospel is the Sermon on the Mount, in which Matthew expected the followers of Jesus “to live according to these norms always and under all circumstances.”¹⁰

The third comment that expresses Hebraic holism is “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). The presence of Jesus is not an occasional presence, nor is it dependent upon the disciples “making disciples.” Rather, because Jesus is always and everywhere present to his disciples, they are empowered to be missional and to call others in the name of Jesus to a life of discipleship.

The Great Commission demonstrates that Jesus did not introduce various programs for evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation. Instead, following in the tradition of Hebraic holism, Jesus taught that becoming a disciple is a process that takes place in a continuous way in the worship and community life of the church. This vision of a continu-

ous walk is substantiated in the other Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles, but the study of these books and the communities they represent are beyond the limits of this writing.¹¹ Instead, I turn to the writings of the early church (second and third century) to provide more illustrations of the journey concept of making disciples.

The Unity of Ministries in the Ancient Church

The unity of the ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation continued into the early church, especially the first three centuries. Careful attention was paid to this unity by the early church fathers.¹² Early church scholar Alan Kreider writes, “As I see it, in Christianity’s early centuries conversion involved changes in belief, belonging and behavior in the context of an experience of God.”¹³

A case in point is the conversion of Justin at about A.D. 130. A philosopher in search of truth, Justin set out from his home in Samaria to study under a “stoic, an Aristotelian, a Pythagorean, and a Platonist.”¹⁴ Yet in none of these did he find satisfaction. One day when he was walking by the sea, he encountered an old Jewish man, apparently a common person, who simply shared his own story of salvation. In response to this testimony, Justin was converted and transformed. He later spoke of this conversion as the opening of “the gates of light.” Justin went on to be the greatest apologist for the Christian faith in the second century and died the death of a martyr.¹⁵

Justin’s writings reveal the cycle of believing, belonging, and behaving that exhibits the making of disciples in the second century. In *The First Apology* he asserts the importance of belief when he describes those who are coming for baptism. He refers to them as persons who “are persuaded and believe that the things we teach and say are true”¹⁶ and moves on to emphasize behavior in saying baptismal candidates are to “promise that they can live” by the teaching of the church. He warns that “those who are not found living as [Christ] taught should know that they are really not Christians, even if his teachings are on their lips.”¹⁷

Justin is also the first noncanonical writer to provide us with a full insight into the worshipping community. He describes the reading and preaching of the Word and then adds elements of belonging to a community: fellowship that is characterized by common prayer, the passing of the kiss of peace, and the sharing of the Eucharistic meal.¹⁸

These unitive ministries of believing, behaving, and belonging are given in greater detail in the third century, especially in the writings of Hippolytus, a Christian leader in Rome. The commitment to make disciples and not just converts is evident in the development of a fourfold

process of spiritual development that carried a person from a position of seeking through a process of hearing the Word and becoming a disciple, a deeper process of spiritual formation, and finally a process of assimilation into the full life of the church.¹⁹ The terms Hippolytus used to describe the spiritual journey of making a disciple are *seeker, hearer, kneeler, faithful*. Between each of these four stages of spiritual formation is a passage rite, the final rite being baptism. Table 1 shows the process of evangelism, discipleship, Christian formation, and assimilation into the church in the late second and early third centuries.

Table 1: Spiritual Formation and Passage Rites

The Process	The Result
Stage 1—The Seeker	Christian inquiry
the rite of welcome	conversion
Stage 2—The Hearer	Discipleship
the rite of enrollment	commitment to become baptized
Stage 3—The Kneeler	Spiritual formation
the rite of baptism	full membership in the church
Stage 4—The Faithful	Active participation in the church

This journey of disciple making and Christian formation is clearly ordered around the cycle of believing, behaving, and belonging and is accomplished in the context of the worshiping community. Initial conversion brought the seeker into the church. Here the new believer spent considerable time as a hearer, learning how to live the Christian life. Next, the hearer moved to the stage of kneeler where he or she was instructed more deeply into the faith of the church, into the life of prayer, and into the reality of spiritual warfare. At the end of this period the believer was baptized into full membership in the church. Finally, in this state of belonging, the believer was known as faithful. In this fourth stage of spiritual formation he or she learned more about the mystery of worship, especially a fuller meaning of baptism and the Eucharistic meal.

This brief summary points to an intentional process of evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation. The process of formation was not left to mere hope that the new converts would mature. Instead, the church’s approach to new converts was to take them by the hand and walk them through an intentional, life-giving process of formation that assured they believed the faith handed down by the apostolic community, that they learned how to behave like a Christian, and that they became active participants in the new community to which they now belonged. Unfortunately, this unitive process gradually broke apart

into a series of programs, until the concept of a process of formation itself became lost.

We now turn to a brief overview of the dissolution of the unity between evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation in the Western church. This dissolution and the barriers it creates to making disciples of new Christians is one of the major challenges we face in today's church.

The Dissolution of the Ancient Process of Christian Formation

The unity between evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation achieved in the early church gradually broke down over a long period of time. The full story of this dissolution is far too complex a subject for this writing. Consequently, I will refer to the highlights of the story and suggest readings in which the story is told in greater detail.²⁰

The Conversion of Constantine: Christendom and the Dissolution of Ancient Evangelism

The first blow to the unitive process of conversion came through the conversion of Constantine. Constantine, in a battle with his rival Maxentius, reportedly saw a vision in which he was told to paint the sign of the cross on the shields of his soldiers. He won the battle and attributed the victory to the God of the Christians. From that time onward he favored the Christian faith. However, while viewing himself as a Christian and practicing prayers in private, Constantine did not submit to the church until the end of his life. He honored the Christians, gave them special privileges, and made an ostensible claim to Christianity without believing, behaving, and belonging in the way established in the first, second, and third centuries. For two decades "Constantine offered the world a new possibility of an un-baptized, un-catechized person who nevertheless somehow was a Christian—a Christian Lord who had not bowed his knees to the Lord of the Christians."²¹ Instead, he waited until he was in his deathbed to submit to the church and its process of conversion. Unlike Justin Martyr's conversion, which was connected to an experience, Constantine's conversion appeared to be rote and mechanical, following the rules but missing the Spirit. In this way he modeled a new kind of Christian—one who proclaimed faith but did not have a life of faith within the church.

Second, by legitimizing the church, Constantine caused it to shift from the counterculture model of the previous centuries to one that

had a new place in society. It was now not only common but beneficial to be a Christian. Soon benefits were given to church leaders, buildings were provided for meeting places, and the careers of civil servants were enhanced if they were Christian. What was once a hostile environment for Christians now became an inviting climate for Christians and a hostile place for pagans and Jews.

Infant Baptism: A New Paradigm

Consequently, both the meaning and process of conversion changed in the fourth century. Society had become Christianized, so to speak. Therefore, baptism shifted from adult baptism to infant baptism, and the process of Christian formation now had to occur after baptism.

Augustine is a case in point. He reports how he was received into the church as an infant, which then admitted him immediately to the position of being a catechumenate (one under instruction in the faith). According to this system he was now a baptized person who needed to be instructed before becoming a full member of the church. During the time as a catechumenate, Augustine could hear sermons but not receive the Eucharist. He then submitted to the church, was instructed in the faith, and went on to become one of the great fathers of the church.

The process of Christian formation had changed. Prior to Constantine, the process was conversion, rigorous training in discipleship and Christian formation, followed by baptism and full admittance into the life of the church. After Constantine, however, the rise of infant baptism challenged the process and resulted in the breakdown of the process itself. This shift to infant baptism laid the groundwork for the developments in conversion and discipleship in the medieval era.

Medieval Christendom: Baptismal Regeneration

The shape of conversion and discipleship in the medieval era was determined by the rise of the institutional church and by the sacramental system of salvation. Both the theology and process of conversion had developed into a fixed understanding and form. Following is a summary of the medieval process of conversion and discipleship:

- Salvation was first administered to infants at their baptism, which forgave original sin and gave the infant the gift of the Holy Spirit (baptismal regeneration).
- A first confession was made at about age seven in preparation for the child's first communion.

- The first communion was administered.
- The child was confirmed either before or immediately after first communion. It was thought that confirmation provided an increase of the Holy Spirit, spiritual maturity, and a readiness to do battle with evil as the child was made a “little soldier” of the faith.
- When the child, or now adult, sinned, the sacrament of penance was available to restore a right relationship with God.
- The Eucharist provided a continued relationship with God. (In the late medieval era a rule was made that the Eucharist must be taken once a year.)
- The sacrament of unction, administered by the priest, was the final sacrament of salvation provided on the deathbed.²²

In the high medieval period of the thirteenth century, it was taken for granted that all people were Christians except for Jews and some pagans. Christianity, it was argued, was the very air breathed in this Christian society. One was born into an atmosphere of faith. The Christian context that assured eternal life was the cycle of life from baptism at birth, confirmation in early adolescence, the availability of penance and the Eucharist, a marriage lived sacramentally, the affirmation of God’s grace at death, and even burial in the churchyard.

In this system, especially in the High Middle Ages, many had faith and lived lives of sincere devotion to God. The great cathedrals are testimonies to the faith of the artisans who built these majestic buildings. Art, literature, music, philosophy, and even town planning all issued around the church. In many ways the High Middle Ages marked the transformation of society, a crowning achievement of leaders who were deeply devoted to God and to making society into a visual and tangible experience of heaven.

Yet the sacramental system of faith and spirituality, which looks good on paper, did not last. In the two hundred years before the Reformation, the system became abused, much of the papacy and clergy became immoral, salvation was sold through indulgences, and the church became corrupt. Attempts were made to renew the church, and here and there monks, friars, and priests like John Wycliffe and Jan Huss were able to break through the spiritual impasse. In many ways their leadership paved the way for the Reformation.

The Reformation Era: Catechetical Innovation

The Reformation of the sixteenth century did not occur in a vacuum. The whole world was undergoing a paradigm shift. The old medieval

world with its political, economic, educational, artistic, and religious structures was passing through enormous changes.

Two changes that specifically bear on our topic of evangelism and Christian formation were the Renaissance and the invention of the Gutenberg press. The press made it possible for the Bible—a book that had been forbidden to be read—to be printed and distributed. The Renaissance revived education, and what was once a highly illiterate society was now characterized by educated people who could read and write. The age of print had arrived.

So how did print change the matter of evangelism and Christian formation? The Catholic system of salvation taught that the practice of baptism and confirmation conferred an “indelible character on the soul, i.e. a kind of spiritual seal.”²³ The sacraments made a person a Christian. However, in this system of salvation there seemed to be no emphasis on how the sacramental gift of salvation was nurtured into an experience of living faith. The sacraments worked the work of faith without the necessity of personal response.

Luther, like the Catholics, retained infant baptism but restructured its nature in light of the central doctrine of justification by faith. Luther believed that salvation comes from God in the church because of the work of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit calls us to faith through the gospel as it is proclaimed in the Word and embodied in the water of baptism. Infant baptism is “a most fitting paradigm of God’s gracious justifying act.” An infant is “a model of complete dependency and trust” because an infant has nothing to offer—“no works, merits, or personal decisions.” Instead, “an infant witnesses to Luther’s theological understanding that salvation is entirely God’s act alone.”²⁴ Thus Luther wrote in the *Large Catechism*, “Baptism is valid, even though faith be lacking. For my faith does not constitute baptism but receives it.”²⁵

Luther also had a lively sense of how Christians are called to live in their baptism. The work of the Holy Spirit through baptism was to produce an identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus into which the person had been baptized. In the *Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (1519), Luther wrote that baptism “is nothing other than a rehearsal for death itself and, as a consequence, Christian life is to be a daily death to sin and resurrection to life, a remembering of and living out of baptism which will come to its ultimate fulfillment only in the final death when the old self—the old Adam—dies completely in order to be raised up to life forever.”²⁶

This lively faith is generated by the Spirit through the instruction in faith that comes *after* baptism, *before* confirmation, but also throughout life in the church. To assure this lively faith Luther introduced the *catechism* (the word means “instruct”). The catechism was made possible

because of the invention of print and the widespread ability to read and write. Luther's catechism, known as *Kleiner Katechismus*, was the greatest contribution to Christian education and personal spiritual formation of the sixteenth century. It was published in 1529, and within forty years more than one hundred thousand copies had been sold. Other catechisms appeared as well in the Reformed community of Calvin and in the Catholic church as a result of the Counter-Reformation.²⁷

The purpose of the catechism is made clear in the preface to Luther's *Kleiner Katechismus* of 1529: "It is necessary to make the pupils and the people to learn by heart the formulas chosen to be included in the little catechism, without changing a single syllable. As for those who refuse to learn word by word, tell them they are denying Christ and are not Christian. Do not accept them at the Lord's Supper. Do not let them present a child for baptism. . . . When the children know these texts well, they must also be taught their meaning, so that they will understand what the words mean."²⁸

The catechism is essentially a way of inculcating Christian doctrine. Its emphasis is on knowledge and personal commitment to knowing the truth. The positive feature of the catechism is that it teaches the Christian faith, a matter neglected in the medieval era. The negative feature of the catechism is that children become subject to intellectual faith and lose the spirit of being "a creative and mystical Christian."²⁹

The negative impact of the catechism has reverberated down through history in the Protestant tradition. The spirituality of the medieval mystics and the spirituality fostered by the sacramental system when it was at its best was now supplanted by intellectual knowledge. The rejection of everything Catholic then led to the Protestant notion that knowledge and spirituality were the same. For nearly five hundred years the spirituality of Protestantism has been expressed in the quest for knowledge. This quest found a happy partner with the emphasis on reason in the modern period. In the postmodern era, however, where knowledge is not enough, there is a longing once again for the disciplines that produce a spirituality rooted in the mystical and sacramental traditions.

Calvin, like Luther, maintained infant baptism, and the Reformed movement produced its own catechism. Both Luther and Calvin rejected the sacramental system of spirituality. They both retained the notion of God's grace made available through baptism (with some nuances of difference). They also retained confirmation but emphasized that the person to be confirmed had to learn the basic knowledge of the faith summarized in the catechism and had to express a willingness to embrace that faith personally.

Because both Luther and Calvin continued to work out of a Christianized-society mind-set, evangelism was still attached to infant baptism. Then Christian formation was identified as knowledge affirmed at confirmation. For both Luther and Calvin, the Eucharist was viewed as a rite of continuous nourishment. The approach to evangelism and Christian formation among the Reformers is summarized in table 2.

Table 2: Conversion and Discipleship among the Reformers

The Sacraments	The Result
Step 1—Infant Baptism	Evangelism
Step 2—Catechism	Teaching the knowledge of faith
Step 3—Confirmation	Affirmation of commitment
Step 4—Eucharist	The rite of continued nourishment

The Reformation also produced the Anabaptists, who were very different from Luther or Calvin.* The Anabaptists modeled themselves after the church of the first three centuries. Consequently, they rejected the state church, infant baptism, and the entire sacramental system. For this they were resoundingly persecuted, even by Lutherans and Calvinists.

For Anabaptists evangelism and spirituality were based on a repudiation of the state and society. This was followed by a personal, radical choice to follow Jesus demonstrated by adult baptism and life lived in an alternative community of faith. Here they followed the disciplines of Christ through voluntary submission to the leadership of the Christian community. This radical discipleship spread rapidly throughout Europe. Thousands were martyred for their faith, but it was a light that no one could put out. The Anabaptist way cut a path into the future that shaped aspects of the free church tradition (as opposed to that of the state church) until the present day.³⁰

Table 3: Anabaptist Conversion and Spirituality

The Choice	The Commitment
Step 1—Adult Baptism	Evangelism arising out of personal choice
Step 2—Discipleship	Life in the Christian community under the discipline of the church

*Anabaptists proper include groups such as the Amish and Hutterites, who live totally apart from the common culture, to Mennonites and Brethren, who live in varying degrees within the culture. They are known primarily for their pacifism and compassionate social action.

This Anabaptist model gave rise to the insistence on the distinction between church and state and argued for a countercultural Christianity. Since the collapse of a Christianized society, a new appreciation of the Anabaptist principles has become widespread among Christian cultural critics. From the seventeenth century to about 1950, the Anabaptists were largely ignored by the Protestant establishment. During the Enlightenment the Anabaptists continued their way of life with little to no interaction with the established church. They were even ignored by the free church, which was the beneficiary of their martyrdom and the convictions for which they died.

The Enlightenment: Shift to Reason and Experience

The Enlightenment, which began in the eighteenth century, introduced a new worldview that was to undermine vestiges of Christian formation that still remained in the Reformation churches. First, the Enlightenment was characterized by the supremacy of reason. The revolutions in cosmology, epistemology, and science suggested that the world worked like a machine and was understandable. This worldview led to several new developments. For one thing, Christianity became privatized; this was especially true with conversion, which was seen as an experience, not subject to rational inquiry. On the other hand, conservatives, using the primacy of reason, argued that Christianity was a rational, logical, coherent system of truth that could be proven to be true. Consequently an apologetic approach to Christianity developed. It was an intellectually driven cognitive view of the faith that neglected the disciplines of spiritual formation and favored what Josh McDowell has aptly called the “evidence that demands a verdict” Christianity.³¹

Second, the supremacy of reason separated all aspects of life into distinct disciplines. Each subject constituted an era of inquiry in and of itself. For example, the compartmentalization of disciplines is reflected in education. In high school, students attend six or seven classes a day studying each subject for fifty minutes at a time. These programs of study isolated one inquiry from another and treated subjects as though they were independent of each other. The same mentality impacted the church, which developed various programs of ministry. A case in point may be Sunday school organized around studies designed for particular age groups, each rooted in a particular field of inquiry. Generally, because of the rational nature of Sunday school, these studies have little to do with disciplines of spiritual formation.

During the Enlightenment, the use of the catechism continued to dominate Reformational Christianity as a way of instructing people in

the faith and through that method achieving Christian formation. This form of learning for the most part has had an independent life of its own and has not fostered a process that integrates the church, its worship, discipleship, Christian formation, and the like into a coherent whole. Christian evangelism, discipleship, and spiritual formation were seldom if ever intentionally integrated with each other in a way that made a total impact on the life of faith.

A second kind of Christian formation emerged during the Enlightenment. A revolution against *mind-oriented Christianity* was initiated by the *heart-oriented Christianity* of the pietists of the seventeenth century, the revivalists of the eighteenth century, and the missionary movement of the nineteenth century. These movements introduced the concept of a conversion experience that could be connected to a specific date. This new method can be best illustrated by the ministry and writings of John Wesley and the evangelical awakenings in England and America.

In order to understand Wesley and these movements in general, a word needs to be said about an alternative way of knowing that had been introduced in the seventeenth century. Both Luther and Calvin had emphasized that a relationship with God was based largely on right knowing. By the seventeenth century, the emphasis on right doctrines produced a Protestant orthodoxy, which in its worst expression was an embrace of orthodox teaching without the transformation of life.

A reaction grew against this Protestant scholasticism. It asserted the primacy of feeling and called for a passionate Christianity not only marked by right doctrine but also a feeling of forgiveness, a commitment to piety, and a Christian life concerned for the poor and needy. John Wesley had an experience of faith in which he felt his heart “strangely warmed.” This experience propelled him into an active ministry of mass evangelism. Followers of Wesley popularized the “invitation” or altar call to a personal, life-changing decision to be a follower of Jesus.³²

The evangelical revivals of Wesley set into motion another kind of Christianity that has remained in conflict with the mainline Christianity of Luther and Calvin. These two streams of Protestant Christianity—Reformational and evangelical—are characterized by a highly conflictual understanding of evangelism and spiritual formation. This conflict is evident today, although unknown in its detail to many practitioners of the faith. Briefly speaking, it is an objective versus a subjective approach to the faith and Christian discipleship. The objective process, taught by the Reformers and their successors, emphasizes how God’s grace works to save humanity. The subjective approach, espoused by many evangelicals, emphasizes how personal faith takes hold of God’s grace. Table 4 illustrates the difference.

Table 4: Reformation Salvation Process Compared to the Evangelical Process

Objective Christianity: The Process of God's Grace	Subjective Christianity: The Process of Human Faith
<i>Imputation</i> God gives salvation as a gift.	<i>Regeneration</i> A person experiences the new birth.
<i>Justification</i> Man embraces this gift through faith expressed in baptism and confirmation.	<i>Justification</i> The feeling of forgiveness, an assurance of salvation in the heart
<i>Sanctification</i> The Christian thankfully lives out salvation in a life of holiness and works of mercy.	<i>Sanctification</i> The Christian consciously dies to sin and chooses to be resurrected to the new life.

The emphasis on the subjective side of salvation among the evangelicals led Wesley to develop a process of salvation and spiritual formation that bears a close resemblance to the process established in the third century. Table 5 gives a brief outline of the process of salvation and spiritual formation practiced by Wesley and his early followers.

Table 5: The Wesleyan Process of Salvation

The Process	The Results
<i>Step 1—Preaching</i> Directed toward the entire congregation	Evangelism, repentance, and faith
<i>Step 2—Societies</i> Class meetings for pastoral care	Small groups that embody the way of salvation
<i>Step 3—Society bands</i> Smaller groups for discipleship and spiritual formation	Societies were divided into subgroups to handle various conditions such as relapse or pursuit of Christian perfection.

This form of spirituality remained dominant in Wesleyan evangelicalism throughout the nineteenth century. Twentieth-century evangelicalism, rooted in the fundamentalists' debates of the first part of the twentieth century, was dominated by the Reformed paradigm but mixed up with the evangelistic preaching style originating with Wesley and continued by Charles Finney, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham. However, the twentieth-century evangelists did not continue the process of Christian formation initiated by Wesley and expressed in the societies and society bands.

Twentieth-century evangelicalism failed to develop any patterns of ministry that integrated the various disciplines of Christian formation into a coherent whole. Instead, it developed parachurch movements that sought to fill the void left by the traditional church. These movements

range from children, youth, and college ministries to business groups, prayer walks, men's or women's groups such as Promise Keepers or the small group movement, as well as small- and large-scale evangelistic rallies. These parachurch movements all supplemented the ministries of the church, which continued to offer various programs for children, youth, men, women, singles, and married people. Consequently, evangelical Christianity has been characterized by many movements—some that evangelize, others that disciple, still others that seek to provide spiritual awakening, commitment, and social action. Yet there has been a noticeable lack of any attempt to put into place a process that brings all these elements together in the ministry of the local church. The hunger for unitive ministries of Christian formation is now beginning to emerge, as seen in the small group movement of many churches. These small groups, however, are not yet fully integrated with Christian formation.

The Challenge to Recover Unity of Ministries

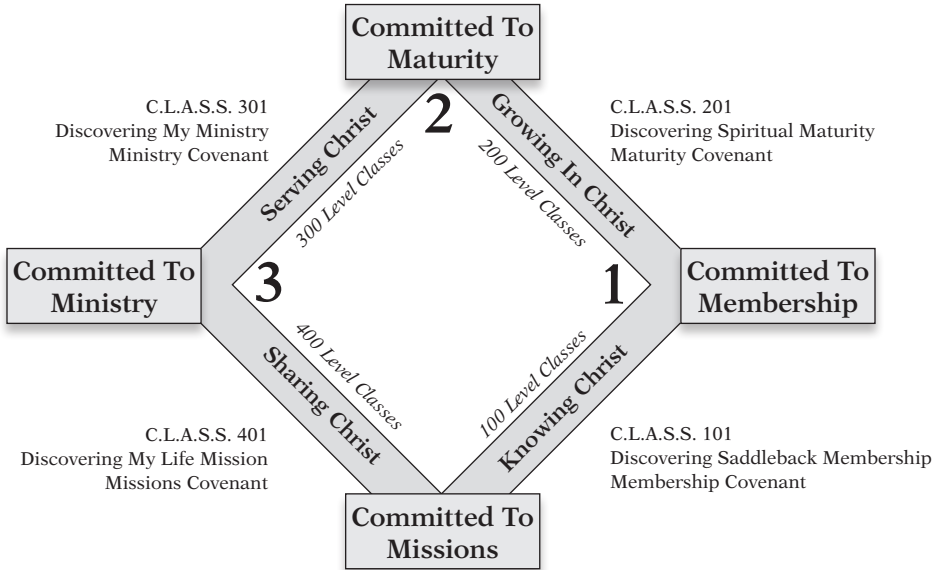
The new understanding of a highly complex and interrelated world challenges the notion that we can view the world in separate parts. The world is now seen in its total complex unity. This unified vision of reality has resulted in a new emphasis on interdisciplinary studies. Church leaders now see the need to bring all the ministries of the church together in a coherent whole. Evangelism, discipleship, Christian formation, and assimilation into a full, conscious, and active participation in the church is not achieved through a series of unrelated programs in a willy-nilly way. Rather, church leaders are already experimenting with models of ministry that bring together what were once different ministries and programs into a process of spiritual formation.

Furthermore, the rise of a secular and pagan society, the emergence of the New Age Movement of spirituality, postmodern pluralism, and relativism have created a new cultural situation in which the church speaks the faith. So, where do we go in the twenty-first century with the ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation?

The Future

A new common understanding is emerging. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Community Church in Saddleback, California, has articulated the future in these words: "Instead of focusing on growing a church through programs, focus on growing people by setting up a process, based on God's purposes, that enables people to become what God intends for them to be. If you will do this, the growth of your church will

be healthy, balanced, and consistent.”³³ In keeping with his advice to other ministers, Warren has set up a baseball diamond pictorial process for conversion and spiritual formation that looks like this:³⁴



The Saddleback Life Development Process

Rick Warren and hundreds of churches influenced by his process are seeking to undo the dissolution of the unity that rightly belongs to evangelism and Christian formation. In part 1, I take the reader back to the well-developed model of the early church that was designed for a pagan and pre-Christian world, which is in many ways like our own world. It speaks to the newly awakened sense that evangelism must result in discipleship and Christian formation.

Conclusion

The International Consultation on Discipleship put its finger on a crucial issue: Current models of evangelism do not make disciples. I have pointed out the early church’s emphasis on the unity between evangelism and the ministries of Christian formation and have briefly sketched the dissolution of the unity between evangelism and Christian formation throughout the history of Christendom.

Finding a process for Christian formation has now become a burning issue among evangelicals around the world. How are we going to meet the challenge? The burden of *Ancient-Future Evangelism* is to say that clues to the future are found in the third-century model. Of course, we cannot simply pick up the ancient model and drop it unchanged into the twenty-first century. Instead we need to draw from the principles at work in the ancient model and adapt these principles to Christian formation in a post-Christian culture. In part 1, I identify these principles and apply them to Christian formation in our present post-Christian world.

Table 6: Christian Formation in the New Testament and Early Church

Theme	Its Manifestation
Hebraic holism	Faith is seen as a journey, a walk throughout life.
The Great Commission	Jesus did not introduce “programs” to make disciples. Becoming a disciple is a lifelong process.
Second- and third-century discipleship	The process has developed into four stages and three passage rites.

Table 7: The Dissolution of the Ancient Process of Christian Formation

Event	Effect on Christian Formation
The conversion of Constantine 311 A.D.	The introduction of infant baptism brought about the breakdown of adult conversion and the ancient process of Christian formation.
Medieval Christendom 600–1500	The sacramental system of salvation—grace is given from infancy to the grave. It works objectively without an emphasis on proper Christian discipleship.
Luther and Calvin 1500–present	Continued with infant baptism, developed the catechism, and retained confirmation.
The Anabaptists 1500–present	Restored adult baptism and accountable discipleship in the church
The Enlightenment 1750–1950	Christian formation is seen as intellectual acquiescence.
Wesleyan evangelism 1750–1900	The primacy of feeling; the born-again experience; small group accountability
Twentieth-century evangelicalism	Mass evangelism separated from any intentional process of Christian formation in the local church. Various forms of Christian formation emerge in para-church groups.
Twentieth-first-century evangelism	The International Consultation on Discipleship calls for the restoration of a process of Christian formation that restores the unity of Christian ministries.

Questions for Discussion

1. Take time to review the history of Christian formation. Firmly fix this history in your mind so that your discussion can freely flow from one period of history to another.
2. Locate the current theology and practice of Christian formation employed in your church in the historical period in which it emerged.
3. Compare your current model with the process of Christian formation in the New Testament period and in the early church.
 - a. What can you learn from Hebraic holism?
 - b. What can you learn from the Great Commission?
 - c. What can you learn from the practice of the early church?
4. How does the analysis of the International Consultation on Discipleship pertain to your church? (See appendix 4.)
5. What steps should you take to return to the model of the early church?