

ABSTRACT

THE PRACTICE OF A SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAM TO STRENGTHEN CHRISTIAN MATURITY IN SRI LANKAN HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS

by

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The practice of a spiritual formation program to strengthen Christian maturity in house church leaders is important in order to build a strong and effective house church movement. The house church planting movement is not a new phenomenon, but a church planting strategy that began in the book of Acts. Some of the greatest movements in the world such as those in South America, China, India, and Ethiopia can be linked to house church movements. A proper spiritual formation program can serve as a strong foundation for such a movement that has the capacity to grow rapidly and exponentially. The failure to have an intentional spiritual formation program to develop Christian maturity in house church leaders can lead to weak Christian maturity, weak Christian witness, and weak discipleship. It can thereby weaken a movement that has the capacity to grow God's church in the world. While there is a lot of scholarship concerning Christian maturity and spiritual formation, there is very little scholarship addressing the spiritual formation process that develops and strengthens Christian maturity in house church leaders. In Sri Lanka, as the house church movement gathers momentum, there is a tendency to focus more on the practice and strategy of planting house churches while neglecting the spiritual formation and Christian maturity in house church leaders. The

demand for results, achieving of goals, and taking the gospel to all parts of the country at **all** costs has caused many problems for the growing church.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a selected group of house church leaders who participated in a spiritual formation program that included a deep prayer life, weekly fasting, the practice of a personal rule of life, peer-to-peer accountability, and the prayerful reading, studying, meditating, and applying of scripture according to the ancient *lectio divina* practice.

This research was conducted through an explanatory, mixed-method design based on a ministry intervention that consisted of a teaching seminar, pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys, and qualitative data through a ten-person focus group.

The findings of this research indicated that there was a significant improvement in Christian maturity, and a transformation of lives, attitudes, and behavior in the house church leaders that were involved in the research. The findings proved how important a spiritual formation program is for a rapidly growing movement such as the house church planting movement.

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled

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LEADERS**

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by

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CHAPTER 1

Nature of the Project

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter begins with the story that led to this research. The story spans thirteen years of ministry in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka and focuses on Sri Lankan house church leaders. The autobiographical introduction leads into the purpose, focus, and nature of this research and includes a description of the type of research, the participants, and details of the research. This chapter concludes with an explanation of the theological foundation for this research.

Autobiographical Introduction

The Rugby World Champions and the most dominant sporting team in history, the New Zealand All Blacks, live by a code engrained in them from their very young days: “*Better People Make Better All Blacks.*” They focus on being good men before good players. Character always triumphs over talent, and integrity always comes before skills (Kerr, James. *Legacy* kindle 33). This can and should be applied to church leadership: “*Better Christians Make Better Leaders.*” Here’s why.

In the year 2001, I gave up a flying career with the national airline Sri Lankan Airlines to join the pastoral team as the worship pastor at Peoples Church AG, a relatively large mega-church. On December 26th, 2004, as a result of a powerful earthquake off the shores of Indonesia, a Tsunami destroyed most of the southern and eastern coast of Sri Lanka, resulting in the deaths of 30,196 people. In 2005, five months after the Tsunami, the leadership of Peoples Church Colombo sent me to the southern city of Galle to aid in the relief work that was taking place. I was part of a team of fifteen

including a very experienced senior pastor. My task was to assist in the relief work, strengthen church leadership, and start an English ministry for the expatriates working in Galle.

However, in 2006, the senior pastor left unexpectedly, and the pastorate of the church was suddenly thrust on me. Despite my lack of knowledge of the local culture and the local language, I embraced the new challenge and for the first two years of my new ministry I did what I was supposed to do and did it in the way I was used to doing it back in Colombo. I encouraged all the believers to come to church on Sunday mornings and to bring new people along, and I even provided transport for them at times.

In 2008, a massive wave of persecution swept across the Southern Province of Sri Lanka which resulted in the closing down of many small churches in rural areas. Believers outside of the cities were prevented or discouraged from going to the more established churches in the cities. Accessing the thousands of villages became difficult due to revived anti-Christian sentiments that continue to this day.

It was during this period that God began to shape my heart to consider alternate ways of “doing church” in order to reach the multitudes in villages that did not have access to the gospel. A question that would constantly prick my heart was: *“Do I want a big congregation or an influential one?”* I would ask myself how a church could be influential and yet neglect the mass of people in rural areas that have no access to a church. As the burden began to grow, I began to ask myself, *“What is the church? If the church is about people rather than buildings, then shouldn’t the church be where the people are rather than getting people to come to a ‘church’?”* and *“What kind of church model would be suitable to take the church in an adaptable, adjustable, secretive,*

strategic and influential way into unreached areas?” It was during this six-month period, that the house church vision was birthed in my heart.

Initially, with very little knowledge but plenty of vision, I launched the first few house churches with a focus on rapid multiplication and growth. The book of Acts became my text book, and I was excited with what I initially witnessed and became convinced that the house church model was the appropriate church planting model in Sri Lanka, but as the house churches began to grow, I began to experience problems that became more and more consistent over time. I noticed that some house churches grew, multiplied, and made an impact in their village but many other house churches struggled to even exist. Over the next three years I began to observe more carefully the lives of the house church leaders and the lifestyles of the people in the house where the house church was conducted. Something I noticed in my observation regarding these house churches was that weak Christian maturity weakened the house church movement. In many of these instances, the outward ministry, whether it be evangelism, preaching, or caring for the flock, was very good, but the quality of the house church leader’s spiritual life was not congruent with this outward ministry and service. Who they were on the inside somehow did not match what they were on the outside. In my urgency to plant more churches, I had unintentionally raised some house church leaders who were gifted, capable, and talented, but whose union with Christ was not strong. They were not growing spiritually, and they were struggling with their inner lives. This incongruence was a problem that needed to be dealt with. St. Gregory stated in his book “The Book of Pastoral Rule,” “every pastor should be heard more by his deeds than his words, the footprint of his good living should be the path that others follow and not just the sound of

his voice.” (Gregory 40) This is extremely applicable to house church leaders who seek to share the gospel with those who do not know Christ in rural village settings. In an environment where there is resistance to the gospel and where methods of evangelism such as track distribution, crusades, and evangelistic services are not possible, it is the lifestyle of the believer that makes the gospel first attractive. Evangelism is done through building friendships and relationships. I observed among the house churches that were under my overall responsibility that Christian maturity in believers is not possible without Christian maturity first evident in house church leaders. Wherever house church leaders lived and served like their Savior, house churches seemed to thrive, whereas where house church leaders lacked Christian maturity their house churches seemed to invariably struggle. I seemed to be observing first-hand what Ajith Fernando in his book *Jesus Driven Ministry* says,

When Christians are tempted to lie, to give a bribe, to take revenge, to be prejudiced against someone, or to act in a dishonorable way, the lives of their leaders should act as a deterrent. Seeing the way their leaders behave should give people a thirst for God that they will be ashamed of sin and earnestly desire holiness. (Fernando 157)

I further observed that the issues of Christian maturity translated into the believers’ homes as well. One of the reasons the house church movement is successful in this part of the world where resistance to church planting is strong is that the house church movement, if done correctly, impacts the neighbors first. The neighborhood is impacted by the evident change in the believers’ lives, thus making the gospel attractive and a house church gathering possible. Wolfgang Simson comments on this in his book

The House Church Book, “The most difficult place to be holy is at home but it is also where the Gospel has the greatest impact and Christianity becomes a powerful testimony where it counts the most: right next door” (Simson 50) In this scenario, the neighborhood, the place of immediate impact, insulates the house church. However, when Christian maturity is weak and there is little or no lifestyle change in the believers and their homes, there is no impact on the neighborhood. In order to grow the house church, people from outside the neighborhood (who may not necessarily witness the day-to-day lives of the believers) are approached and given the gospel and invited to the house church. It is in cases such as this that the house church is exposed to hostility. As I continued to study and observe what was happening in our house churches, I realized that almost half of the persecution issues were related to a lack of Christian maturity and weak lifestyles.

In 2011, as I was meditating on the book of Acts, I was impressed that the three prerequisites when choosing leaders in the early church were that they be of “good standing, full of the Spirit, and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Later on in the book of Acts Luke describes Barnabas, the one sent to Antioch to observe the fast-growing gentile church in Antioch, as “a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). I was deeply moved by this insight and decided that I would try to raise my house church leaders to be first of all good people, to embrace the character of Christ, the very one whom they strive to present and represent to their communities. It is my conviction that without Christian maturity, the House Church Movement is weak and powerless.

Six years later, Christian opposition has now taken a new shape in Sri Lanka. A government sponsored intentional and focused effort against the church has curtailed church planting as we know it. A minimum forty perches of land is needed to build a

church, but it must first be registered at the ministry of religious affairs, a “killed by committee” approach, where permission is not denied or approved. At the same time, media propaganda against the church has influenced the masses against Christians. The government has also allowed the rise of an extreme Buddhist group known as the “Buddhist-force” to encourage people to rise up against “fundamental-Christianity” and embrace their cultural and traditional religion – Buddhism.

In this setting, church planting has taken new dimensions. Church planting cannot be done as usual and by the usual people. It is virtually impossible for a pastor to pick up his family, go to some unknown and unreached village, buy a block of land, construct a building, and build a church. It is almost certain that such a one-dimensional approach to church planting will result in very dangerous repercussions. Therefore, the house church movement has gained even more prominence and impetus. But with ninety-nine percent of our churches filled with first-generation Christians, with no proper spiritual formation development program, coupled with an over emphasis on rapid growth and church planting, it is my opinion, based on my experience of house church planting in the last ten years, that the house church movement in Sri Lanka will struggle if we fail to address the issue of Christian maturity in house church leaders. In an environment where a believer’s life is most probably the first gospel that a non-believer will witness, poor Christian living will jeopardize the planting of house churches. As Ajith Fernando in his NIV Application Commentary on Acts says,

The seriousness of this problem surfaces in the growth of religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, which focuses on self-effort. People of these religions object that Christianity with its free offer of forgiveness for sins through grace, opens the

door for irresponsible living (This is one of the most common criticisms made against Christianity by Buddhists in Sri Lanka). In answer, we may say that God not only forgives us but he also gives us the strength to overcome sin. But if they accept that argument, they will examine the lives of Christians to see whether it really works. (Fernando 356)

It is of great importance that we focus on building Christian maturity in leaders before sending them out to plant churches, if not, the house church movement is in danger of fizzling out before it barely begins. It is for this reason that I felt burdened to formulate a spiritual formation program to develop Christian maturity in house church leaders in the Sri Lankan house church movement.

Statement of the Problem

The primary problem that the house church movement in Sri Lanka faces is a lack of Christian maturity among the house church leaders. There are three primary issues that contribute to the problem at hand. First, most of the house church leaders are first generation Christians. They have walked into the Christian faith after following Buddhism or Hinduism. Both Buddhist and Hindu beliefs are tied in with cultural and traditional practices which believers find difficult to detach from. Some of these practices work contrary to Christian behavior. Further, while good behavior is encouraged in their former religions in order to inherit good merit, people grow up with a sense of detachment between their spiritual and physical lives; whereas in the Christian faith, Christian behavior is the evidence of a transformed life. The primary attraction of the gospel is and should be that it has the power to change peoples' lives.

Second, there is no systematic and intentional spiritual formation development in house church leaders. There is a tendency to focus more on skill and ability over behavior and maturity. Therefore, the training and development of house church leaders focuses more on how to do the work and less on the worker. This has led to “potential” house church leaders who are capable but immature Christians.

Third, the urgency to plant house churches in order to grow the movement has compromised the balance of “good workers doing a good work.” The greater emphasis on the “work” has neglected the emphasis on the “worker.” There is a focus on leaders doing a good work and a tendency to overlook character flaws for results.

These three issues are the reason for this study. In an environment where the power of the gospel is first witnessed in the lifestyle of the Christian, weak Christian maturity in Christian believers is a serious problem. This is compounded by weak Christian maturity in house church leaders who are entrusted to shepherd them and also to spearhead the House Church Movement in Sri Lanka.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a selected group of house church leaders who participated in the Spiritual Formation Program.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided the project.

Research Question #1

What is the current level of Christian maturity among the house church leaders selected for this research?

Research Question #2

What is the level of change in Christian maturity among the house church leaders after undertaking the study?

Research Question #3

What are the various elements of the Spiritual Formation Program that influenced and strengthened Christian maturity in the house church leaders?

Rationale for the Project

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity from pre-study to post-study among the house church leaders who participated in the Spiritual Formation Program. The main reasons for undertaking this research are as follows:

1. There is great potential for growth in the Sri Lankan house church movement, a movement that is the best strategy for a Sri Lankan ministry context. However, for this movement to succeed, spiritually mature leaders will be needed to pioneer the movement. This research was undertaken to highlight the connection of spiritual formation and Christian maturity.

2. There is no current spiritual formation program to develop Christian maturity in house church leaders in Sri Lanka. This research was to create awareness and tangible results to facilitate future spiritual formation programs in house church leaders.

3. Over the years, history has shown that many revivals or movements of God have been undermined by weak Christian maturity. The early church focused a lot on discipleship and developing Christian maturity. This research highlighted the importance

of investing in the lives of the house church leaders, equipping them to live Christ-like lives as they serve in a Christ-like manner.

4. This research explored the Biblical mandate to develop Christian maturity.

Definition of Key Terms

There are key terms that need defining in order to make this study successful.

House Church: For the purpose of this study, a house church is a gathering of believers in a private home for worship. In this study, a typical house church will involve two to three families who gather weekly to worship, pray, fellowship, grow together in discipleship, minister to each other with their individual gifting, and together reach their village with the gospel.

House Church Leader: For the purpose of this study a house church leader is one who shepherds a group of believers gathering in homes to worship God. A house church leader is a lay believer who is entrusted with the responsibility of shepherding the group, teaching the Word, distributing the sacrament of communion, collecting the tithes and offerings, role-modeling the Christian faith through life-example, mentoring disciples to be future house church leaders, and spearheading the vision of the house church movement in its geographical surroundings.

Christian Maturity: Christian maturity is a life-long development process of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ through union with Him by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. For the purpose of this study, Christian maturity is defined as the leaders' ability to be secure in their identity in Christ, to display ever increasing Christ-likeness, and to show obedience to God's purpose and commission for their lives. The essential

qualities include a spirit-controlled life evident in the house church leader's beliefs, attitudes, behavior, and ministry.

Spiritual Formation Program: In this study, a spiritual formation program is an intentional, systematic, and measured practice of certain disciplines with the goal of developing Christian maturity in the house church leader. These practices include a consistent and growing prayer life, weekly fasting, the study meditation and practice of scripture, living according to a personal rule of life, and growing in community through weekly peer-to-peer accountability. A spiritual formation program will have both academic and practical components to create sensitivity to the shaping of the inner person by the Holy Spirit.

A Personal Rule of Life: For the purpose of this study a personal rule of life is a set of resolutions that the house church leader has committed to honoring and living by during the period of research.

Peer-to-Peer Accountability: For the purpose of this study, peer-to-peer accountability is the accountability process that takes place between two people.

Delimitations

Sri Lanka belongs to the Asian continent, a continent with one of the fastest growing church movements in recent history. The House Church Planting model has contributed to much of the growth of the church in Asia, in China, India, Korea, Pakistan, and now Sri Lanka. The Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka states that Sri Lanka is an island with an area of 25,332 square miles, governed through 9 provinces and 25 districts. It is home to 20.77 million people of which 74.8% are Sinhalese, 11.1% are Tamils, and Muslims, Burghers, and other ethnicities make up the rest of the population.

Buddhism is the predominant religion at 70.2%. Hindus make up 12.6% of the population; 9.6% are Muslim, and 7.6% are Catholic. It is estimated that evangelical Christians make up just 1.5% to 2% of the total population ([http://www.statistics.gov.lk/page.asp?page=Population and Housing](http://www.statistics.gov.lk/page.asp?page=Population%20and%20Housing)).

The study occurred within three large congregations of more than 500 people each. These were Assembly of God churches in the Western and Southern provinces of Sri Lanka, namely, Assembly of God Puwakpitiya, Peoples Church Matugama, and Assembly of God Galle. All three churches minister in similar environments where the Christian population is under 2%, thus resulting in 99% of their congregations being first generation Christians. The ministering environment is resistant to the gospel. Christians face many hardships, and yet the house church movement has witnessed strong growth, and there are approximately five hundred house churches planted in the region. The vision of the three churches involves an aggressive house church planting movement, and, in order for the movement to succeed, leadership development and training is a critical component for all three churches.

For the research to be effective, certain limits were imposed. First, this study focused specifically on the three specific churches mentioned. Second, the three churches are from the Assemblies of God denomination. Other denominations were not considered for this research. Third, first generation Christian house church leaders who have been Christians for over three years and have served as house church leaders for a minimum period of one year were selected. Fourth, all participants were between the ages of 21 and 45 years of age.

Review of Relevant Literature

In order to study the role that spiritual formation plays in the development and strengthening of Christian maturity, this project drew upon biblical, historical, and relevant theological resources.

First, a biblical survey was undertaken to trace the themes of Christian maturity and spiritual formation across the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is filled with rich and vivid descriptions of spiritual maturity, whether it be describing Enoch as one who walked with God, Abraham as a friend of God, or David as a man after God's heart. The Old Testament is filled with the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and meditation of God's Word. The Psalms provide a rich resource for Old Testament spirituality and is the book that John Wesley considered the choicest part of the Old Testament (*John Wesley's Notes On the Entire Bible* Kindle Loc 30103). The Psalms provide a unique view of Israel's spirituality in day to day life (Phillip Yancey *The Bible Jesus* Read 128). For countless generations, the Psalms have been an important resource for spirituality. Walter Brueggemann says, "The format for our presentations of the Psalms has assumed that authentic spirituality (that is, genuine communion with God) is never removed from the seasons, turns, and crisis of life" (Brueggemann. *Spirituality of the Psalms* Kindle Loc540-541).

In the New Testament, the gospels continue to expound on the practices of prayer, fasting, and life according to the Word as key elements in the process of spiritual formation towards Christian maturity. The Lord Jesus Himself taught that a fruit-bearing life is a result of abiding in Him. Throughout the Pauline epistles, the apostle speaks about the changed life after salvation, on growing, maturing, and pursuing the Christ-like

nature in the life of the Christian. The fact that most of the epistles in the New Testament were addressed to congregations that gathered in house churches provided added value to the study. Throughout the New Testament, the gathering of believers does not take place in large buildings but in various places, primarily in the homes of believers. The book of Acts records house gatherings in Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Troas. The houses of Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Aquila and Priscilla, Justus, Crispus, Stephanas, and Gaius are all mentioned as locations for the gathering of the church. It is in this very setting that the scriptures bring out the broader themes of spiritual formation and Christian maturity.

Second, a brief historical survey was undertaken to track the beginnings of spiritual formation with the purpose of developing Christian maturity. While the spiritual disciplines have their roots in scripture and were passed down through the teachings of the early church fathers and various schools of spirituality, a focus on spiritual formation practices for laity were reviewed, such as the catechetical practices of the early church, especially John Wesley's contributions to spiritual formation. In his sermons *The Scripture Way of Salvation* and *The Means of Grace*, Wesley provides great insight into spiritual formation with Christian maturity as the goal. Wesley's "means of grace" are all the ways God uses to work grace in believers' lives from the day they come to know him until they meet Christ again (<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-16-the-means-of-grace/>). At the heart of Wesley's methods to develop Christian maturity in believers were small groups of six to eight people which Wesley named "the class meetings." The class meeting proved to be an effective tool for spiritual formation so much that D. L. Moody once stated that the class meetings were the

best model for training converts the world had ever seen (Henderson, D. Michael. *John Wesley's Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* 81).

Third, a survey of relevant theological resources was drawn upon for this project. Henri Nouwen's *Spiritual Formation*, Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* and *Streams of Living Water*, Dallas Willard's *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Gordon T. Smith's *Called to be Saints*, Donald S. Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Kenneth Boa's *Conformed to His Image*, and Robert Mulholland Jr's *Shape by the Word* were some of the key resources that provided valuable information and knowledge on the subject of spiritual formation in relation to Christian maturity.

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a selected group of house church leaders who participated in a spiritual formation program. A group of one hundred house church leaders were selected for this research. The research methodology used for this study was a mixed methods design. For quantitative data purposes, each participant was required to complete a pre-test questionnaire to investigate the current level of Christian maturity among the group. After the completed questionnaires were collected, fifty of the participants were designated as a Control Group and the other fifty participants were designated as the Test Group. The Test Group participants participated in a two-hour seminar on Christian maturity and spiritual formation. At this lecture, the participants were first taught what spiritual formation is and the inseparable link between spiritual formation and Christian maturity. Second, the Spiritual Formation Program that they were going to follow over the next four weeks was presented to them. Third, each house church leader was

encouraged to write down a simple seven-point personal rule of life that they were committing to live by for the next four weeks. Finally, at the end of the pre-intervention seminar, the fifty participants were divided into groups of two and instructed to contact each other once a week and share their spiritual formation experience with each other. An accountability guideline was provided to each of them.

At the end of the four weeks of the study, all one hundred participants were required to complete a post-test questionnaire to investigate the level of change in Christian maturity among the Control Group and Test Group participants. Both pre-test and post-test questionnaires were identical in order to gather as accurate data as possible with regard to the level of change in Christian maturity among the participants.

Because questionnaires are not completely effective in identifying the cause for attitude, belief, and behavioral change, a Focus Group of ten participants was selected from the Test Group in order to gather qualitative data. The Focus Group gathered for approximately two hours to share their experiences. A third-party adult who was not involved in this research was recruited, briefed, and trained to facilitate the Focus Group. The Focus Group discussions were recorded on audio and yielded valuable responses and insight into the research undertaken.

A pre-test questionnaire was used to gather data about the level of Christian maturity in the participants. A post-test questionnaire was used to gather necessary data about the level of change in the level of Christian maturity in the participants. A guideline was used to facilitate accountability conversations in the Test Group. All research literature was in Sinhalese and Tamil and was subsequently translated into English to

assist in understanding of the study. The Focus Group discussion notes were translated into English as well.

Type of Research

This study was a mixed-method design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research and utilizing the strengths of each. Creswell, in his book *Research Design*, states that there is more insight to be gained from a mixed-method design of quantitative and qualitative research than by using either form by itself. The combination of both forms gives an expanded understanding to complex research problems (203). The characteristics of quantitative research include collecting numeric data from a large number of people using instruments with preset questions, where responses address research questions that are specific, narrow, measurable, and observable (Creswell *Educational Research* 13). The pre-test and post-test questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data. Sensing, quoting Sharan B. Merriam says that, “Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth” (Sensing, *Qualitative Research* Loc 1629-1632). Qualitative data was gathered from the Focus Group discussions and provided valuable insight to the “lived experience” of the participants during the intervention period.

Participants

A group of house church leaders from Buddhist and Hindu backgrounds was selected for this study. They were from both the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups and

included both men and women. The house church leaders were between the ages of 21 and 45 years of age. All the house church leaders were first generation Christian, converts for a minimum of three years, baptized, and with a minimum of one year's experience as a house church leader. The house church leaders were from the three Assemblies of God churches in Matugama, Puwakkpitiya, and Galle, situated in the Western and Southern provinces. The participants were also selected for their demonstrated commitment to their faith and ministry. In line with Sensing's Naturalistic Inquiry, the researcher sought to select people who represented a broad range of perspectives by increasing inclusivity (Sensing, Kindle Loc 2289-2292). Each house church leader was selected with their senior pastor's prior consent.

Data Collection

The data was gathered using two methodologies: questionnaires and transcripts from a focus group. This study was a mixed-method intervention model to determine the level of change in Christian maturity of the participants through the intervention of a spiritual formation program. The selected one hundred participants were equally divided into a Control Group and Test Group of fifty each. Quantitative data was gathered from a pre-test questionnaire from both Control and Test Groups to investigate the current level of Christian maturity among the participants. This questionnaire served as a marker to evaluate and study the rest of the findings of the research. At the end of the four-week study period, a second questionnaire was completed by both Control and Test groups to determine the level of change in Christian maturity of the participants after the test period. The data from the post-test questionnaire also helped determine the effectiveness of the spiritual formation program intervention which the Test Group was exposed to but

which the Control Group was not. The Control Group participant questionnaires and the Test Group participant questionnaires were collected separately.

Qualitative data was gathered through a Focus Group of ten participants. These participants were selected randomly from the Test Group. An experienced third-party candidate was recruited to facilitate the discussion with the Focus Group. The type of interview questions that were asked were semi-structured qualitative questions. This structure was most effective as it kept the interview focused on the main themes and issues. The purpose was to probe more deeply the impact the Spiritual Formation Program had on the participants and the reasons for the high increase in the levels of Christian maturity in the Test Group. Furthermore, the Focus Group data also provided valuable insight into the various elements of the Spiritual Formation Program and how each element influenced the strengthening of Christian maturity in the participants.

The group, comprised of ten individuals, was balanced between male/female and Sinhala/Tamil adults. The Focus Group conversation provided critical insight into the reason for the high percentage of change in Christian maturity in the Test Group.

Data Analysis

This research project utilized both quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative data was gathered through questionnaires and was utilized to determine the level of Christian maturity at the pre-intervention stage. At the end of the four-week Spiritual Formation Program, an identical questionnaire was utilized to determine the level of change in Christian maturity after the intervention period. The questionnaires were designed to yield quantitative data, and the data was analyzed statistically using Descriptive Analysis and a T-Test model (Creswell 183). The quantitative data analysis

provided easy to measure and understand results in relation to the level of change in Christian maturity before and after the test.

Qualitative data was gathered through a ten-member Focus Group. The main aim of gathering research from the Focus Group was to ascertain the reasons why the participants of the Test Group responded at a higher rate in comparison to the Control Group. The transcripts of the Focus Group were analyzed using Documentary Analysis as suggested in Sensing.

The data was read and analyzed reflexively as the researcher himself is a major contributor to the Sri Lankan house church initiative and was also part of the intervention process as lecturer. In Research Gate's writing on qualitative data analysis, Jennifer Mason is quoted as saying that reflexive reading "will locate you as part of the data you have generated and will seek to explore your role and perspective in the process of generation and interpretation of data" (*Three approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis* 2-3). The analyzing of both quantitative and qualitative data strengthened the key findings of this research.

Generalizability

The objective of this study was to help house church leaders enhance their spiritual lives by growing in Christian maturity through the practice of a spiritual formation program. Though this study was limited to house church leaders in the Western and Southern provinces of Sri Lanka, given Sri Lanka's small 25,000 square mile size, similar ministry environment across the country, and the pressing need of developing Christian maturity in Christian leaders, the results can be generalized to house church leaders across the rest of the country in a variety of contexts and denominations in Sri

Lanka. Furthermore, Christian maturity must be the goal of all believers across all countries, all contexts, and all denominations. Christian maturity does not happen unintentionally or by accident. It requires the practice of disciplines, of a way of life, and therefore this study is valuable to anyone and everyone who wants to grow in Christian maturity.

Project Overview

This study contributes to understanding the importance of a spiritual formation program to develop Christian maturity in house church leaders. The following chapters unfold in the following manner. Chapter 2 explores the biblical foundations for this research by exploring the scriptures that address Christian maturity and spiritual formation. Second, chapter 2 presents the theological foundations that guide this research. Third, this chapter will briefly examine the spiritual formation practice of catechesis and John Wesley's teachings and practices of spiritual formation. Finally, this chapter will review modern literature that is pertinent to a spiritual formation program to develop Christian maturity.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed explanation of the project design, the research methods of the study, and the methods of analysis that were undertaken. Chapter 4 presents the key findings of the research and sets forth answers to the three research questions. Chapter 5 provides a summary and conclusion of the study, including evaluation, observations, and interpretation of the findings. Chapter 5 also provides suggestions for further studies.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Chapter Overview

The context of this study is the Southern and Western provinces of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a majority Buddhist country, where evangelical Christians make up just 2% of the population. There is much resistance to the gospel, as Christianity has often been portrayed as a Western religion with a colonial background. In this context, the life and ministry of a Christian is the first point of contact that an unbeliever has with the gospel. A lack of Christian maturity in Sri Lankan Christians has weakened the spread of the gospel. Furthermore, as in this study, many church congregations in the country have a high percentage of first-generation Christians. There are many first-generation Christian leaders entrusted with the task of discipling new converts. This study focused on a key group of people entrusted with spreading the gospel and discipling new believers – the house church leaders. It is imperative that the house church leaders of this Island nation are strengthened in a manner that builds greater spiritual maturity in their lives so that their lives will echo the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1:4-7:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a select group of house church leaders who participated in the Spiritual Formation Program.

This chapter reviews the literature pertaining to this project. Due to the vast amount of literature available the researcher narrowed his review of literature specifically to that which focuses on Christian maturity and the practices of spiritual formation that contribute to building Christian maturity. For the purpose of this study, a spiritual formation program is an intentional, consistent, and systematic practice of certain disciplines with the goal of developing Christian maturity in the house church leader. These disciplines include prayer, fasting, the study and meditation of scripture, living according to a personal rule of life, and growing in community through peer-to-peer accountability. The literature review will examine the practices of these disciplines in terms of their importance in strengthening Christian maturity.

First, this chapter will explore the biblical foundation for this research by exploring passages that address Christian maturity and the above-mentioned spiritual formation practices that strengthen maturity. Second, this chapter will explore the theological foundation that guides this research. Third, this chapter will briefly examine the spiritual formation practice of catechesis and John Wesley's teachings and practices of spiritual formation. Finally, this chapter will review modern literature that is pertinent to a spiritual formation program to develop Christian maturity.

It must be stated at the very beginning of this chapter, that the researcher believes that no spiritual formation which leads to the strengthening of Christian maturity can ever take place without the revelation of God through the person of Jesus Christ and the

working of the Holy Spirit. Beginning with the account of Creation, it is God's revelation to mankind that initiates the spiritual formation journey. Through every covenant in the Old Testament or with every hero of the faith, be it Noah, Abraham, Moses, David or the Israelites, God initiated the relationship with man and invited man on a journey. In the New Testament, there is no Christian maturity without the manifest revelation of God in Christ Jesus, leave alone the fact that there is no church nor Christian without the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is also no true spiritual formation without the Holy Spirit, Himself. The Greek word for spiritual i.e. *pneumatikos*, means to be "under the influence of the Holy Spirit" (Strong 4151). Therefore, the researcher of this study states clearly that his belief is that God is the initiator of the spiritual journey to become Christ-like and the Holy Spirit is the ignitor of this continuous journey. Hence, the researcher assumes that the reader is fully aware of this fundamental truth.

Biblical Foundations for Christian Maturity in the Old Testament

Christian maturity is the life-long process of growing in the likeness of the Lord Jesus Christ and displaying Christ-like qualities in a believer's day-to-day life and ministry. Christian maturity is obviously New Testament terminology. When exploring the Old Testament, the term spiritual maturity would be appropriate. However, to explore Christian maturity devoid of the Old Testament because the term is not in Old Testament scripture is a mistake because the definition of Christian maturity as stated above is a very strong theme that runs through the Old Testament. Whether it be called Christian maturity or spiritual maturity, both terms concern living lives that model God-likeness. Like the Christians of the New Testament, the Israelites in the Old Testament were chosen and called by God out of all the people of the earth to be His treasured possession

(Exodus 19:5-6, Deuteronomy 7:6). The Old Testament is a story of what it means to live as God's people in a manner that reflects His character (Christopher J. Wright, *Living as the People of God* 10). Reflecting God in life and being like Him is the essence of Christian maturity.

Spiritual maturity can be traced all the way back to the account of Creation, where God made man in His image and likeness. Man, as the epitome of a loving God's creation, is created for a unique relationship with God in a creation that is complete and good. Even though the fall of man tarnished the intended purpose of man and distorted the "God-like" features in him, God's revelation to man and man's pursuit of God continued. The Old Testament is filled with rich life examples of what spiritual maturity looks like in the believer and in a community of believers.

Spiritual Maturity in The Time of the Patriarchs

Spiritual maturity during the patriarchal period can be studied through the lives of those who lived in that era. After the fall, humanity, in general, gradually moved away from God, but there were those who sought after God, who called on the Name of the Lord (Genesis 4:26). One of the first examples of spiritual maturity is the life of Enoch. Enoch was the first man in the scriptures to walk with God. The text of Genesis chapter five details a genealogy from Adam to Noah but pauses to describe Enoch's unique relationship with God. "Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus, all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:22-24). Enoch lived in perilous times where it seemed people lived in open rebellion to God's ways and did as they pleased, yet the scriptures state not once, but twice, that Enoch walked with God.

Enoch lived against the grain of a godless society, and yet his spiritual maturity is witnessed by the fact that he walked with God for 365 years. Claus Westermann, in his commentary, describes the phrase, “walking with God” as “a fellowship with God morally and religiously perfect, a way of life morally pleasing to God resulting from an obedient attitude to God” (*Genesis 1-11 Continental Commentary* 358). Bruce Waltke in his commentary on Genesis further explains that,

In this line, Enoch is listed as the seventh, a position often favoured in Biblical genealogies, and this rare expression denotes to enjoy supernatural, intimate fellowship with God, not merely to live a pious life. Enoch’s life affirms that those who “walk with God” in this fallen world will experience life, not death as the last word. (*Genesis; A Commentary* 114)

In years to come, Noah, his great-grandson would do the same thing. The world was getting worse as time went by and the people of the world were descending into an abyss of sin, but the scriptures say that Noah was a righteous man, who was blameless among the people of his time, and that he walked faithfully with God (Genesis 6:9-11).

Throughout Scripture the terms “walking with God,” “walking before God,” “walking in the ways of the Lord,” or “walking in the spirit” depict a certain level of spiritual maturity. They speak of a friendship, an on-going relationship, intimacy, mutual delight, and partnership with God (Sorge, B. *Secrets of the Secret Place*, Kindle Loc 2649-2650). Spiritual maturity flows out of a relationship with God. A hand-in-hand partnership, a bond of friendship, and a commitment of harmonious fellowship where He is God, and we are His people. It is this relationship that separated Enoch from the rest of the population, and it was this relationship that enabled Noah to live blamelessly among

the people of his time. Throughout history, Enoch's life, and later on Noah's, has continued to inspire believers to aspire to deeper intimacy and greater maturity by desiring to walk with God.

If Enoch was known as the one who walked with God, Abraham was known as a friend of God (James 2:23). Abraham is a key figure in the religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. He is "Father Abraham" to the Jews; the Muslims call him "the Imam to the nations," and to the Christians, he is the "Father of Faith" (Edmiston, John *Abraham – The Father of Faith* 1). Abraham had many flaws in his life. He, on more than one occasion, lied to get out of trouble (Gen 12:13, 20:2); he tried to short-circuit God's plan by sleeping with his maid (Genesis 16:4) and did nothing to save her when Sarah exacted revenge on her. Yet Abraham teaches a lot on maturity. Abraham was obedient even to the point of sacrificing his son (Genesis 22) and believed in God despite overwhelming evidence not to, for which God credited to him as righteous (Gen 15:6). Abraham also built altars of sacrifice to trace his journey of faith with God. Abraham enjoyed a deep relationship with God, which helped him overcome the toughest of challenges and not lose faith in the midst of hopeless circumstances. In Genesis 18 God comments on the life of Abraham by saying,

Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him. 18:18-19

Abraham kept the ways of the Lord and directed his children and his household to “keep the way of the Lord” and to do what is right and just. Through Abraham’s life faith, obedience, and doing what is right are shown to be ingredients of spiritual maturity.

Job, though not considered a patriarch, was a compatriot of the patriarchs of the book of Genesis (Barker & Kohlenberger III. *NIV Commentary* 742) and lived around the time of the patriarchs (Genesis 10:23, 22:20-22). The scriptures state that Job was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He was the greatest man in all of the East (Job 1:1,3). Job’s spiritual maturity was built on a deep fear of God. He was so conscious about living before God in an upright manner that he even made sacrifices on behalf of his children just in case they had sinned against God in their hearts. The scriptures say that this was Job’s regular custom (Job 1:5). The drama that unfolds in the book of Job begins when God boasts of Job to Satan. Job’s life was such an exemplary life that God says that “there is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.” (Job 1:8). What transpires after Satan’s conversation with God is a remarkable story of human suffering by the hands of an evil foe, but what is most amazing is that even though Job’s life takes a hit that would fell most believers completely, Job did not dishonor God. As a matter of fact, God puts His own character on the line and gives Job the opportunity to vindicate God’s character. The devil accuses God of giving benefits to man so that He can receive the worship of man. He claims that God is not lovable purely based on His character. In response, God allows Job to prove the devil wrong. Psalm 25:14 says, “The Lord confides in those who fear him; He makes his covenant known to them.” Job was able to live blamelessly and righteously because

he feared God. Each of the patriarchs demonstrate that spiritual maturity devoid of a relationship with God is impossible.

Joseph's life is another life that stands out because of his character and maturity in his faith. Favored by his father and hated by his brothers, Joseph soon found himself living in a foreign land away from anything that resembled home. It would have been tempting for Joseph to give up on his faith and beliefs, but Joseph was not willing to compromise on his faith and integrity. Joseph was so trustworthy that Potiphar put his entire household under Joseph's care and did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate (Genesis 39:6). Even when Potiphar's wife made sexual advances towards Joseph, Joseph rejected her advances because he could not think of doing such a wicked thing by dishonoring Potiphar and sinning against God. Joseph's integrity led him to jail, and even in jail, Joseph proved responsible, trustworthy, and faithful to the extent that the prison guard put Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners. It was only a matter of time before God raised Joseph to the highest administrative place in the Egyptian kingdom as shown to him in his dreams. Yet, despite having absolute power and phenomenal success, Joseph remains faithful, humble, and responsible. Even when the opportunity to exact revenge on his brothers presented itself, Joseph chose the option of forgiveness and spoke the famous words,

Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children. And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19-21)

Through the lives of the patriarchs, it is clear that spiritual maturity was formed by a deep relationship with God. They feared God, loved God, walked with God, walked before Him blamelessly, trusted Him, and obeyed Him. Their spiritual formation was based on a deep prayer life. God spoke to them in tangible ways, and in these conversations with God, God shaped them the way He wanted. It is also clear that their relationship with God formed who they were as individuals. Their relationship with God manifested itself in how they lived, and this was the hallmark of their maturity. The New Testament era is considered the era of grace, with direct access to the throne room of God and the Holy Spirit allows for powerful prayer lives. However, the patriarchs modelled what it meant to be in a deep relationship with God.

Spiritual Maturity in The Nation of Israel

God's dealing with the nation of Israel provides insight into what God expected of His people, their purpose, and how they responded to God's invitation. As always, God initiated the relationship by redeeming Israel out of slavery in Egypt after hearing their cries (Exodus 2:23-24) and brought them into a covenant relationship at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19 - 24). This was not because Israel was special but because of God's redeeming grace as stated in Deuteronomy 7:7-9,

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples.....but it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery..... Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.

Israel's response to God's grace was supposed to be loving obedience and living according to the principles and laws of the covenant, which Israel agreed to do.

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:4-6)

In the Old Testament, a priest is someone who stood between God and the people and mediated between both. He represented God to the people and the people to God. It was through the priests that God's Word and Will were made known to the people. Israel as a nation of priests was likewise called to represent God to the nations. As Christopher J. Wright says,

If Israel as a nation were to be a priesthood, the implication is that they were to represent God to the nations in an analogue way. God's character, word and ways would be made manifest in their life as a nation. That is why the role for Israel expressed in verse 6 is linked closely to the call for obedience in verse 5. It would be as they lived out the quality of national and social life demanded by the law they were about to receive, with its great chords of freedom, justice, love and compassion, that they would function as God's priests amongst the nations
(Walking in the ways of the Lord 34)

As God's people in covenant relationship with a redeeming God, God desired Israel to reflect His character and nature in their living. In response to God's Call and Purpose for them as a nation, the people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has

said.” So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord (Exodus 19:8). Gordon T. Smith writes,

The Old Testament is essentially the account of a God who forms for himself a people who are specifically called to be holy. When God brings the people of Israel out of Egypt, they are the people of God; that is their identity. This identity as the people of God is the basis on which they are called to reflect—in their life, work and relationships—the holy character of God. And the journey is not merely a geographic journey to the promised land but a journey of a maturing faith in God. God seeks not merely their release from Egypt but to make them into a people who can reflect the purposes of God. God is out to make for himself a people who reflect his holiness, who are marked by righteousness, and who live in justice and the shalom of God. (*Called to be Saints* 17-18).

Israel’s living showed God in action: what He is like, or what He would do (Wright 26). In Leviticus chapter 19, God brings out the practical implications of living as God’s holy people. All ten commandments are broken down, elaborated on, or expounded and developed in different ways (Wenham, Gordon J. *The Book of Leviticus* 264). In verse two, God commands Israel to “be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.” God then proceeds to detail what it means, practically, to be His holy people. Among the more established commandments that one would associate holiness with, i.e. to not make idols, to not worship idols and to not break the Sabbath laws, the Israelites were also commanded to respect their parents, to not reap the very edges of their fields when they reap the harvest, and not to go over their vineyards a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen, but instead to leave them for the poor and the foreigner. They

were commanded to not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight, to not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, to not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, to stand up in the presence of the aged, to show respect for the elderly, to not mistreat the foreigner, and to use honest scales and honest weights. The phrase “I am the Lord your God” appears sixteen times in the chapter as if to say, “this is what I want you to do because this is what I would do” (Wright 27). God’s holiness is very practical, and He expected Israel’s holiness to be very practical too. Gordon Wenham quoting J. I. Hertz, comments on Leviticus 19 by writing,

Holiness is thus not so much an abstract or mystical idea, as a regulative principle in the everyday lives of men and women. Holiness is thus attained not by flight from the world, nor by monk-like renunciation of human relationships of family or station, but by the spirit in which we fulfill the obligations of life in its simplest and commonest details: in this way – by doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God – is everyday life transfigured. (Wenham 190)

The character of Israel was to represent the very character of God Himself. Israel, as a nation among nations, was called to live differently because they were first and above all God’s people. John Goldingay says that Israel’s holiness lies distinctively in belonging to God and this distinctiveness is what governed all the various norms, customs, regulations, and laws (Goldingay, John *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Life* 616). The people of Israel were the children of God (Deuteronomy 14:1), His treasured possession (v3), and a people who God walked among (Leviticus 26:12). As much as God was distinct from the gods of the people of Canaan, Israel was to be distinct from the people living in Canaan, so that through Israel God’s ways would be known to the

nations of the world. Israel was supposed to walk in the ways of God because God's ways reflect who God is. The Old Testament, on many occasions, describes God's character. God is a God of compassion, abounding in love, slow to anger, faithful, merciful, forgiving, a God who is caring and wants to bless, who is concerned about the needy, the poor, the orphans, and widows. These characteristics were also to be the characteristics of the community that lived in covenant relationship with God (Goldingay 587). Israel, whether socially, economically, or religiously, was required to live in a way that was consistent with God's character and in contrast to the ways of the nations that did not know God (Wright 37).

Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? Deuteronomy 4:6

Simply put, Israel was called to be an imitator of God, just as New Testament Christians and the church are called to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1), which is the very essence of Christian maturity.

The Disciplines of Spiritual Formation Practiced by The Nation of Israel

To live in a way that reflects God's character and ways, Israel was instructed to do certain things as regular practice. These were the disciplines of spiritual formation that Israel practiced. When these practices were adhered to, as in the time of Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Josiah, Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, and Nehemiah, Israel prospered

holistically. When these practices were neglected, such as in the time of the Judges or when Israel was under the rule of wicked kings, Israel failed miserably. While there were many spiritual disciplines practiced by Israel, including the temple rituals, the feasts, and the various fulfillments of the covenant, for the purpose of this study, three practices will be briefly explored below.

Prayer. In its simplest explanation, prayer is conversing with God. In its most mysterious explanation, prayer is when a simple, created human being reaches out to a majestic, unfathomable, unimaginable, and undefinable deity who created all that is known. Prayer is an integral and inseparable part of the spiritual life, and it was the case with the people of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is rich with powerful examples of prayer, whether it be Abraham's dramatic conversation with God in Genesis 15, his intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18, Moses' 40-day conversation with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18), his intercession with lifted hands over the Israelite army as they battled against Amalek (Exodus 17:11), Jabez's prayer of blessing (1 Chronicles 4:10), Job's faithful daily devotions (Job 1:5), Nehemiah's prayer of national confession (Nehemiah 1:4), Daniel's prayer life that got him thrown into the lions' den (Daniel 6:10), or Jehoshaphat's national prayer that brought to dust the mighty Assyrian army (2 Chronicles 20). Prayer is inseparable from the Old Testament narrative.

In the Old Testament, prayer is also an indication of the quality of a person's or community's relationship with God. A deep prayer life was an indication of a deep walk with God: the better and deeper the communication, the better the relationship and the more it helped the growth and development of that relationship with God (Brueggemann, *Great Prayers of the Old Testament* Loc 297). A deep prayer life is also associated with

spiritual maturity. The spiritual maturity of Old Testament figures like Abraham, Job, Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah, Elijah, Elisha, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Nehemiah was symbolized by their deep prayer lives. In the Old Testament, an unrighteous man or a wicked man is not portrayed as a praying man. On the contrary, the discipline of prayer is always associated with the devotional lives of the great spiritual leaders of the Old Testament (Brueggemann Kindle Loc 170).

Prayer also crosses all strata of society. It was not only the Old Testament heroes or priests and prophets that prayed. Jabez was a man born out of affliction who prayed one of the greatest prayers in the scriptures. Hannah was a barren woman who prayed to God in absolute desperation, and it is also clear how the Lord was moved to hear the cries of Haggai in Genesis 15. Prayer transcended social, gender, and ethnic barriers.

As a community, Israel's prayers are intertwined with the Old Testament narrative, as though its relationship with God is so connected to the Israelite saga that Israel cannot tell its story without reference to prayer (Brueggemann, Kindle Loc 203). In fact, Israel's deliverance from slavery was a result of them crying out to God, "The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them" (Exodus 2:21).

The Old Testament provides many references to Israel's prayer life, such as in the time of the Judges when the nation cried out for deliverance on many occasions (Judges 3:9, 3:15, 4:3, 6:6, 10:10), at the time of the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chronicles 6-7), during the siege of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 20), and during the time of

the restoration under Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8-9). However, Israel's prayer life is best seen through the collection of prayers that is found in the book of Psalms. With as many as thirty-six references to prayer such as,

- Therefore, let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found (32:6)
- Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. (61:1)
- Lord, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. (88:1)
- I call to you, Lord, come quickly to me; hear me when I call to you.
- May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice (141:1-2).

The Psalms reveal a very vivid, diverse, and deep prayer life of a nation in all seasons. Whether it be the Psalms of ascent, lament, imprecatory, or praise, the Psalms demonstrate that prayer was intertwined with the life of Israel.

As such, God promises to hear people's prayers when their hearts are set on him and refuses to hear their prayers when they only pay lip service. The quality of Israel's prayer life and that of individuals in the Old Testament had an important impact on the state of their spirituality and contributed to their spiritual development or decline.

Fasting. Though there was only one fast commanded by the law on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7), fasting was a common spiritual practice in the Old Testament among individuals and groups as shown in the scripture passages below:

In the ninth month of the fifth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, a time of fasting before the Lord was proclaimed for all the people in Jerusalem and those who had come from the towns of Judah. (Jeremiah 36:9)

Theologians have always believed that the command to the Israelites to "afflict your souls" (Leviticus 16:29, Leviticus 23:27, 29, 32) referred to a time of fasting (<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/fasting-and-fast-days>). Isaiah chapter 58 supports this belief, as when describing Israel's corporate fasting, it says, "Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours" (Isaiah 58:3 KJV). However, fasting was also practiced for specific reasons and to highlight the importance of the situation at hand. Some examples include:

- David fasted for the salvation of his illegitimate son with Bathsheba. (2 Samuel 12:16)
- Esther called for a national fast when her people were faced with extinction. (Esther 4:15-16)
- Nehemiah fasted in mourning after he heard about the state of Jerusalem. (Nehemiah 1:1-4)
- Ezra initiated a corporate fast for safe passage for the Israelites before they embarked on their 900-mile journey from Babylon to Jerusalem. (Ezra 8:21-23).
- Israel fasted before the Lord seeking His help after losing thousands of soldiers in a 2-day battle with the Benjamites. (Judges 20:26)
- Jehoshaphat declared a national fast in the face of extinction by Assyrian king Sennacherib's forces. (2 Chronicles 20:2)

- Nineveh declared a national fast of repentance after the Word of the Lord came to them through Jonah. (Jonah 3:6)

Thus, fasting was more than just a physical exercise, it had a spiritual purpose because it involved connecting with God in a deeper and profound way. Fasting was also an individual or collective reaction to impending calamity or situations that required God's immediate intervention. Fasting was the expressed medium to emphasize the burden and gravity of the situation. As the Old Testament progressed, it would seem that fasting became a regular practice of the Israeli community. In general, God honored fasting by responding to the accompanying prayers and petitions of both individuals and communities alike and intervening in the situations at hand for their benefit.

On the other hand, there are many references where God explicitly voices his disapproval when people fasted without genuine repentance, humble obedience, and expressed behavioral change:

- So the LORD said to me, "Do not pray for the welfare of this people. "When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence." (Jeremiah 14:12)
- So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. (Isaiah 1:15)

- Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted (Zechariah 7:5)

In each of the above passages of scripture, God expresses his dissatisfaction at His people’s lack of repentance and obedience. In fact, God even refuses to hear their prayers and honor their fasts because of unrepentant sin and disobedience. In Isaiah chapter 58, God laments about a people who seem eager to draw near to Him in prayer and fasting, yet exploit their workers (v3), whose fasting ends in quarreling and strife, who lack mercy and justice and oppress the needy. God says that His people cannot fast like that and expect to be heard by Him:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: “Here am I.” (Isaiah 58:5-9)

Thus, when observing the practice of fasting in the Old Testament, one can conclude that fasting was a powerful tool of spiritual formation, used by individuals and communities alike, to express their seriousness and intensity to draw closer to God and to call upon the Lord for deliverance from an impending calamity or hopeless situation. One can also conclude that fasting was a regular practice, and after the exile period, entering into the

New Testament, fasting becomes a weekly practice among many. However, fasting was not a means to an end. Fasting accompanied prayer, and it was effective only when the people were repentant, humble, obedient, and willing to change their ways according to God's will for them (2 Chronicles 7:14, Isaiah 58:4 Nehemiah 9:1, Ezra 4:3, Daniel 9:3, Joel 2:12).

The Observing of the Law. Maybe the most emphasized spiritual practice in the Old Testament was observing the law. The primacy of scripture, the study and meditation of it, and the practical implementation of it to the life of God's people was the defining mark of spiritual maturity. If Israel was going to be God's chosen people, then Israel would have to reflect God's character. Though modern-day Christians view the law as obsolete and irrelevant, the law was essentially God revealing His character to Israel so that they could reflect that character in the daily life of their community (Kinlaw, *This Day with the Master* Kindle Loc 3480-3481). The book of Deuteronomy gives clear instruction on how the law was to shape the spiritual maturity of God's people. Israel was commanded to hear the law, learn the law, and practice the law. The absolute priority given to the law is best reflected in Deuteronomy chapter 6:

These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

The law was the absolute benchmark for living. Hearing the law, learning the law, and trying to practice the law was not enough. The law was to be on their hearts (v6). Israel

was commanded to internalize the law (Fernando 263). The law was to be taught over and over to their children. They were commanded to have conversations about the law right throughout the day and to meditate on the law from the time they woke up until they went to sleep at night. The Israelites were commanded to hold the law in such high importance that they were asked to write the law on their foreheads and tie it on their hands and to write the law on the doorframes of their houses and on their gates. The scriptures were the defining authority and benchmark for spiritual living. Obedience to the scriptures was the gateway to prosperity and blessing. In Deuteronomy alone, there are over fifty references to obey the law (*NIV Exhaustive Concordance* 220). Obeying God's Word, requirements, decrees, and laws was a sign of true love for Him (Deuteronomy 11:1); it was a prerequisite to inheriting the promises of God,

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.

If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow—to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him and to hold fast to him— then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations larger and stronger than you. (Deuteronomy 11: 18-23)

The scriptures were to be honored by each and everyone, from the king to every child in the Israelite community. The king was commanded to write for himself a copy of the law and read it every single day and carefully follow it:

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel. (Deuteronomy 17: 18-20)

The hearing, learning, meditating, internalizing, practicing, and passing down of the scriptures, therefore, was a key measuring line of spiritual maturity in the Old Testament. While prayer and fasting were also visible fruit of spiritual maturity, the obedience to God's Word was the defining benchmark for the people of the Old testament, whether individually or corporately. These values are highlighted in the Psalms, which reveal the day-to-day spiritual lives of God's people.

Spiritual Maturity in The Psalms

Throughout history, of all the books of the Old Testament, the Psalms have been the most popular. An unfathomable number of people have turned over and over again to the Psalms to find encouragement and hope because the Psalms have a wonderful ability to relate to their spiritual lives. The Psalms distinguishes itself from the rest of the books of the Old Testament because it is a collection of prayers set into poetry spanning many centuries (Alter, Robert *The Book of Psalms*, Kindle loc 356). John N. Oswalt, in his

book “*Lectures on Old Testament Theology*,” states that Psalms is the ideal book to read the Old Testament theologically because it is in the Psalms that is found what the Israelites really believed and how it affected their daily lives (14). The Psalms show us how the Israelites grew in their understanding of God and how that understanding led to the development of their faith and how that faith affected their way of living (Oswalt 15). Willem A. VanGemeren says it in the following way,

The psalms mirror the faith of Israel. In them we receive windows that enable us to look out on our brothers and sisters in the faith of more than twenty-five hundred years ago. (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Psalms*, Kindle Loc 2349-2351)

The Psalms also reveal the spiritual maturity of Israel as they faced different situations and lived through different seasons. The Psalms contain all the spiritual practices mentioned in the preceding pages, including prayer, fasting, and the hearing, learning, and application of scripture, and how they related to the spiritual lives of the Israelites. Goldingay comments on the Psalms contribution to the topic of spirituality, “The importance of the Psalms is to remind the community that their prayer is important alongside their actions, and that their side of the conversation is important alongside God’s.” (58)

The Psalms also provide rich pictures and symbols of what true spiritual maturity is and most often, the spiritual practices are invariably associated with spiritual maturity. Psalm 01 illustrates:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,

but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. (v1-4)

The opening Psalm portrays a vivid picture of spiritual maturity and serves as a kind of opening to the rest of the book. The Psalm contrasts the Blessed (or happy *ašrê*, GK 897) man with the wicked. The Psalm presents two ways of living, the way the righteous live and the way the wicked live and encourages the reader to pursue the way of God over the way of the world (VanGemeren, Kindle Loc 4200-4201). The Hebrew word for “way,” *derek*, denotes a transferable road and infers “walking” on a road that leads to a destination. In its figurative sense “way” evokes three notions: 1. “course of life” (i.e. character and context of life); 2. “conduct of life” (i.e. specific choices and behavior), and 3. “Consequences of that conduct” (the inevitable destiny of such a lifestyle) (Waltke, Houston *The Psalms as Christian Worship a Historical Commentary* 134).

The key thing that separates the righteous from the wicked is their response to the scriptures. The actions of the wicked speak for themselves. The righteous person is careful not to “walk,” “stand,” or “sit” in the ways of the wicked. Instead, the righteous person delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. The spiritual formation that takes place due to a deep love for the scriptures translates into spiritual maturity, where life is likened to a tree that is planted besides streams of water. The tree is a familiar metaphor in the scriptures to describe those who are spiritually mature, godly, and righteous. One sees examples of this metaphor in the following verses:

She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her; those who hold her fast will be blessed. (Proverbs 3:18)

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who is wise wins souls. (Proverbs 11:30)

A soothing tongue is a tree of life, but perversion in it crushes the spirit. (Proverbs 15:4)

But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” (Jeremiah 17: 7-8)

Likewise, the blessed man in Psalm 1 never runs dry or thirsty. His life is fruitful just as a healthy tree that will always produce fruit in season. His life is likened to a tree whose leaves do not wither. Whatever this man does prospers. This rich imagery that symbolizes a blessed, godly, and fruitful spiritual life is contrasted with the ungodly life, which is likened to chaff that the wind blows away (v4). The Psalm concludes by saying that the Lord watches over the righteous (v6). Psalm 1 portrays clearly what a spiritually mature life is and sets the tone for the entire book of Psalms. With its emphasis on godly living, it is significant that this Psalm is placed at the very beginning of the book, for it serves as a window to interpret the various psalms in the book and invites anyone to delight in the Lord and in His Word. Psalm 1 also encourages people to learn and practice what the rest of the Psalms reveal. (VanGemeren, Kindle Loc 4180-4183).

Psalm 119 is another psalm that elaborates much on the spiritual life:

Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord.

Blessed are those who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart—they do no wrong but follow his ways. You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.

Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!

Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands.

I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.

I will obey your decrees; do not utterly forsake me.

How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word.

I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Praise be to you, Lord; teach me your decrees.

With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.

I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.

I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. (v1-16)

As in Psalm 1, the blessed man is one who delights in the law of the Lord and who keeps His commands. In the first sixteen verses there are fifteen references to the importance of the Word of God. The scriptures serve as a catalyst to the blessed man's vibrant spiritual life. The various verbs used to describe this man's actions in response to the scriptures is striking. He "walks" according to the law of the Lord; he "keeps" the statutes; he "obeys"

God's precepts; his "ways" hold steadfastly to God's decrees, and he "considers" all of God's commands and learns all the laws. He "lives" according to the Word; he "hides" the word deep in his heart; he "recounts" all the laws with his lips, and he "meditates" and "rejoices" in the ways of the Lord.

The psalmist describes the scriptures in many ways. He speaks about the "law" twenty-five times, the "word" twenty-four times, the "laws" twenty-three times, the "statutes" twenty-three times, the "commands" twenty-two times, the "decrees" twenty-one times, and the "precepts" twenty-one times (*NIV Exhaustive Concordance*), highlighting the importance of God's Word as a spiritual formation tool. The underlying beauty of this Psalm is the writer's deep love and devotion to God. Obedience without love is a tedious practice, and the Psalmist illustrates that deep love for God compels the actions he talks about.

Thus, these two examples from the Psalms show that spiritual maturity involved walking in the ways of the Lord by delighting in God, His Word, and His ways. The blessing of God rests on those who live according to the path set out by God's revelation. Love for God is expressed in doing His will, in obeying His Word, in keeping His commandments and statutes, and in living the way God desires of His people. The godly and the righteous are marked by the quality of their lives and their character and behavior that reflects God's character. In Psalm 15:

Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain?

The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous,

who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander,

who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others;

who despises a vile person but honors those who fear the Lord;
who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind;
who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against
the innocent. Whoever does these things will never be shaken.

The psalmist asks the question, who may dwell in the presence of the Lord? The question is really about what kind of person can dwell in God's presence. The Psalmist himself gives the answer to the rhetorical question he poses by giving a list of character qualities that reflect a godly, righteous, and spiritually mature person. This person's life is primarily characterized by the word "blameless." The Hebrew word used for "blameless" (*tāmîm*, GK 9459) signifies a moral way of living. It does not mean the person is perfect but that his heart's desire is to please God and walk right before Him (VanGemeren, *Kindle Loc 7221-7225*). Spiritual maturity in Psalm 15 is very practical. It is not just about praying, fasting, going to the temple, and reading the scriptures, but it is translated into a godly lifestyle that is a blessing to the community.

Another impact the Psalms have in relation to spiritual living is seen in the tension the psalmists had in following the ways of the Lord, in obeying the scriptures, and living uprightly in the face of personal hardship and seeming prosperity of the wicked. Many Psalms lament the prosperity of the wicked (Ps 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, etc.), how despite being faithful in walking in the ways of the Lord, hardships plagued the psalmists and trials were a constant enemy while the wicked prospered. These themes are highlighted strongly in Psalms 43, 73 and 74.

Let me not be put to shame, Lord, for I have cried out to you;

but let the wicked be put to shame and be silent in the realm of the dead. (Psalm 31:17);

You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me?

Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? (Psalm 43:2);

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.

They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills.

Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.....

This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure

and have washed my hands in innocence. (Psalm 73: 1-14);

How long will the enemy mock you, God? Will the foe revile your name forever?

Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the folds of your garment and destroy them! (Psalm 74:10-11)

Like people now, the psalmists struggle with the tension of doing good and living uprightly in a wicked and unjust world. These tensions have prevailed over centuries and people grapple with the same tensions today. The antidote to these feelings is the presence of God (Ps. 73:17). The psalmist struggles to deal with his feelings until his vision is reoriented by coming into the presence of the Lord (VanGemeran, *Kindle Locations 17773-17777*). As VanGemeran states it, “The psalmist experiences a new

sense of joy, relief and freedom when reflecting on the joy of fellowship with his God. The problem of the suffering of the righteous has no clear resolution, but the pain is relieved by the experience of God's living presence" (Kindle Loc 17773-17778).

In conclusion, the Psalms are invaluable in helping to discern spiritual maturity in the Old Testament. The Psalms give us a window into the lives of God's people spanning centuries. The practices of prayer, fasting, learning, studying, meditating and living according to the scriptures, and then having all these practices cultivate spiritual maturity in the psalmists is clearly evident across the Psalms. The Psalms also provide real life experiences of how the people of the Old Testament dealt with hardship, failure, sin, the prosperity of the wicked and living in a wicked world.

Two Spiritual Figures of the Old Testament

The characters of Moses and David will be briefly examined below due to their deep influence over the passages of Old Testament examined. Moses and David had deep relationships with God and there is much to learn from their lives when it comes to spiritual maturity.

Moses. Moses' life provides great insight into Old Testament spiritual maturity. Philip Yancey states that,

Moses was the single greatest realist about life with God. A proto-prophet, he gave God's message to the people, never diluting or belying it. A proto-priest, he represented the people to God with passion, conviction, and love. He made no promises of happy endings—his own life had none—yet never did he look back with regret. The luxuries of Egypt and the solitary comfort of a nomad's life had both lost their appeal. He belonged with his people, the whole swarming,

cantankerous lot of them, and with his God, the One he had come to know as a friend, face to face. (Yancey 102)

Raised as a prince of Egypt for forty years before living in hiding for the next forty, the last of Moses' forty years is the hallmark of a life that knew the ways of the Lord. Moses had a deep desire to know God and to become familiar with God's ways. In Exodus 33 on top of Mount Sinai, Moses tells God, "teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you" (v13). Interestingly, Psalm 107 says that the sons of Israel witnessed the acts of God but Moses knew the ways of God (103:7). Moses displayed immense spiritual maturity in leading a generally discontent, disobedient, and ungrateful people, walking in circles in a desert for forty years. His maturity came from a deep relationship with God, with whom he spoke to daily. God was his source, his strength, and the very prize of his life. This face-to-face encounter transformed Moses into a man of incredible living. The same man who killed an Egyptian guard (Exodus 2:12) bowed his head in humility as God disciplined Aaron and Miriam (Numbers 12:9). Moses showed great love, long suffering, and selflessness as he interceded for the Israelites in the midst of God promising to make Moses into a great nation (Exodus 32:10). Moses' spiritual life was based on a deep relationship with God. Moses knew who God was, what motivated Him, and the reasons behind the acts of God. Like the patriarchs before him, Moses' life teaches us that spiritual maturity is not something you can gain by simply doing or not doing something but that spiritual maturity is an outflow of a harmonious relationship with God. What is significant about the spiritual maturity of Moses' is that Moses enjoyed this unique relationship with God while he was in community with Israel. Other than for a few exceptions, like Joshua and Caleb, the

majority of the Israelites did not know God the way Moses did. Their lack of relationship with God contributed to weak spiritual maturity, while Moses' face-to-face relationship with God was the foundation of his life and ministry. Exodus 33:11 sums up this unique relationship where it says, "The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend."

David.

After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.' Acts 13:22

As the author of seventy-three Psalms, David influences much of the spirituality of the Psalms. David is a towering hero of the faith. Over sixty chapters have been written concerning him, and the New Testament has fifty-nine more references to him as well. David was a deeply spiritual person. Twice he is called "a man after God's heart" (1 Sam 13:14, Acts 13:22). This means to be in harmony with God. David was a deeply spiritual person and sought to live in harmony with God. This was the essence of David's spirituality. David's heart completely belonged to God. An old proverb that says "what is in a man's heart is the true measure of his character" is embodied by David. David longed to please God. There was nothing more important to his heart than pleasing God. To be spiritual like David means to make one's hearts completely His, i.e. longing to please God and being equally concerned when He is displeased, as well as caring about the reasons and motivations of one's actions. This is how passionately David followed God (Swindoll, *David. A Man of Passion and Destiny* 6).

One of the greatest blessings the world has been given is the deeper look at David's spiritual life through his seventy-three Psalms. In these Psalms, David demonstrates what made him such a spiritually mature person. In addition to a heart sold on God, Psalms, such as Psalms 8, 9, 18, 19, 20, illustrate how much David loved to worship God. Even in moments when he had to weave his way out of calamity in innovative ways, for example when he pretended to be crazy at Gath (1 Samuel 21: 10-15), David attributed his unique escape to God. Psalm 59 is another great escape that David gives thanks to God for. The introduction to the Psalm tells the story of 1 Samuel 18, when Saul had sent men to seize David. David escaped from the window and eventually went and hid in a cave. In these moments, David's response to God's deliverance is seen in Psalm 59, where he gives thanks to God for delivering him from a hopeless situation. Other Psalms of David highlight how he struggled with discouragement (Psalm 6) and loneliness (Psalm 10), how he struggled to find a way out from his enemies (Psalm 22), how he struggled with sin (Psalm 51), and other seasons of his life. These Psalms reveal the spirituality of David. He was a man who longed to please God. His trust in God was unshakable, though at times it seemed to almost crumble. Most importantly, nothing seemed to matter more to David than God. Whatever David did, whether it was killing wild animals bare-handed, felling Goliath, escaping from Saul, defeating the Philistines, or escaping from them, he always attributed all the activities of his life to God. The only one at the center of David's life was God. David demonstrated what it means to "practice the Presence of God" every day, every week, and in every season. He intentionally involved God in all the details of his life (Yancey 130). To David, God was an everyday God. When David felt betrayed by God, he let God

know; he called God into account, insisting that God keep up his end of their special relationship. On other days he danced and celebrated in joy before God. On other occasions, he would reflect on what an amazing shepherd his Lord was. In one of the most treasured Psalms ever written, Psalm 23, David reveals the deep intimacy he has with the Lord. VanGemeren states it this way, “The personal way in which the psalmist speaks of God, the imagery of God’s soothing guidance, and the ensuing confidence in God have all been factors in making this one of the most charming and beloved of the psalms” (Kindle Loc 9194-9196). It is a Psalm depicting the absolute trust and confidence of a sheep in the goodness of the shepherd. The Psalm also reveals a lot about true spirituality. David was guided (v2, 3), nourished (1-2), refreshed (v2), restored (v3), and comforted (v4) throughout this journey. He did this by having a deep trust and harmonious relationship with his shepherd. In conclusion, David’s life shows why he was referred to as a man after God’s own heart. God was always at the center stage of his life. David’s heart was always bent towards God, and his psalms reveal his conscious effort to reorient his own daily life with the reality of that spiritual world beyond him (Yancey 131).

Biblical Foundations for Christian Maturity in the New Testament

The New Testament narrative is not divorced from Israel’s story in the Old Testament. Jeannine K. Brown, in the *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, provides three aspects that flow from the Old Testament and are important to understanding New Testament spirituality. First, God is a covenantal God who initiated the unique relationship with Israel and provided the context for Israel to experience and relate to God. Second, Israel’s experience of God was extremely communal and expressed

through community structures of family, temple, and Torah. Third, God's covenant with Israel was fundamentally missional, meaning that God had a greater purpose to forming, relating, and blessing Israel as His people. He had the nations in His heart. These aspects provide continuity and flow into the New Testament that begins with God's entry into human history in the person of Jesus Christ (46)

Christian spirituality has at its center Jesus of Nazareth, acknowledged by believers to be both Savior and Lord (Willard, *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 58). Christian maturity is a key theme in the New Testament and is taught extensively throughout the New Testament, but it overflows from the larger narrative of the scriptures. God called out Israel for Himself so that they would imitate Him and reflect Him to the nations. In the New Testament, Jesus calls out His disciples to be with Him (Mark 3:13, to be in Him (John 15:1-11), become like Him, and take that experience out to the nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Christian maturity in the New Testament is defined by a life saved, transformed, and lived in Christ. In fact, the New Testament simply assumes that a Christian is someone who, after salvation, continues to grow towards spiritual maturity (Smith 14). The development of a Christian is likened to the physical development of human beings. There is an expectation that, as babies grow and develop to become adults, Christians are expected to grow from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity (Hebrews chapter 5). It is important to note that all the books of the New Testament were written while Christianity was still a very young faith, before the turn of the first century (Carson D.A, Moo Douglas J *An Introduction to the New Testament* 232).

There was much to write concerning who a Christian is and what kind of life a Christian models in beliefs, attitudes, and daily. While Jewish converts would have carried on a sense of identity from their Jewish and Old Testament heritage, for gentile converts the identity of a Christian was a matter of great importance. A new and growing vibrant, multi-cultural and yet persecuted church, from various backgrounds and diverse traditions, strewn across the Roman empire needed to be taught the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith and what living the Christian faith entailed. This was done through an intentional focus on discipleship. Though the gospel writers tended to label all of Jesus' followers as disciples, the rest of the New Testament uses the word for a specific group of people who were taught and trained by a specific teacher. In the early church, which had no seminaries or other established places of training, all leaders were raised through personal discipleship. It would seem that most if not all believers were disciplined at some level throughout the church. (McCallum, Dennis; Lowery, Jessica. *Organic Discipleship: Mentoring Others into Spiritual Maturity and Leadership* Kindle Loc 781-782). This focus on discipleship was the main thrust of spiritual formation to develop mature Christian leaders. Since the New Testament writers like Paul and Peter were personal disciple trainers the modern New Testament reader is provided with rich insight on the subject of Christian maturity.

Christian maturity is a life-long development process of becoming more and more Christ-like through union with Him by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. A person is born a spiritual infant at the point of salvation and then embarks on a life-long journey to be conformed into the image of His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This journey begins when one is made spiritually alive in Christ, and it

continues through an ongoing union with the Lord Jesus Christ, sustained by the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. The truest model of Christian maturity is the model of Jesus Christ, Himself, and, it is this model Christians follow in their quest to imitate Him (Ephesians 5:1), to be made like Him (Romans 8:29), and to come to completion in Him (Colossians 2:10). Christian maturity revolves around a person: Jesus Christ and the quest to become more like Him. Therefore, the exploration of Christian maturity in the New Testaments begins with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and His teachings in the gospels. One also sees the emphasis on Christian maturity in other sections of the New Testament such as the book of Acts and the Epistles. The journey begins in the gospels and the teachings of Jesus.

The Gospels. When the Lord Jesus came to earth, the Jewish community had evolved in their religious practices after the exile. Temple worship existed with the building of Herod's temple, but the synagogue was a new addition to the religion of the Jews. There was a strong emphasis on monotheism. In a sense, the Jews had learnt from their Old Testament flaws, and the Jewish community of the New Testament firmly held to their monotheistic beliefs. While there was a strong emphasis on religious practices such as prayer, fasting, and temple worship, influential sects like the Pharisees and Sadducees had grown out of the intertestamental period and exerted great influence on the religious life of the Jews (*Eerdman's Bible Dictionary* 824). The Pharisees in particular were a very influential group. They were a lay group who were considered by the populace at that time to be experts in the law and were highly regarded by ordinary people (Drane, John *Introducing the New Testament* 36). The Pharisees held strongly to the core beliefs of Scripture but focused greatly on the observance of Levitical law (Evans, Craig. Porter,

Stanley E. *Dictionary of New Testament Background* 786). During the intertestamental time, they developed their own interpretation and application of the law, and these were passed down as an oral law which they used, to understand, interpret, and adhere the Law. The Pharisees were concerned not only with breaking the Law but also with almost breaking the Law, and therefore many regulations and conditions were designed to keep people from doing so (Achtmeier Paul J., Green Joel B., Thompson Marianne M. *Introducing the New Testament; Its Literature and Theology* 185). However, this contributed to a false sense of piety, where focus was more on outward acts and external holiness while neglecting inner purity. The Law was upheld to the very letter, and it was for this reason that the Pharisees clashed with Jesus so often in the gospels. For example, they were more concerned that Jesus had “broken” the Sabbath to heal a man than the healing itself, or had issues with Jesus’ disciples not fasting according to the Law or Jesus spending time with sinners. Thus, many were influenced by the Pharisees and held a very legalistic view of the Jewish religion. The gauge of spiritual maturity was outward piety at the expense of inner holiness (<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/pharisees.html>).

In contrast, when Jesus began His ministry, He modeled a different kind of leadership and spoke about a different way of life and a different kind of Kingdom. He declared a new order of life through His life and work. This new and transformed way of life would affect every dimension of existence (Smith p18). He himself was not your run-of-the-mill king. In fact, Jesus lived what He taught; the quality of His life was matched only by the caliber of His radical teaching (Briscoe, Stuart. *The Sermon on The Mount* 7).

He proclaimed a new kind of Kingdom; He ushered in a new way of living; He presented Himself as a new kind of King, and He invited people to join His new community.

In the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 5 and 6, Jesus taught a way that was, at the very least, radical. Employing a well-known standard Old Testament literary form (Psalm 1:1 for example) that would have resonated with his audience (Keener, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 165), Jesus presents the blueprint for Kingdom living and a new benchmark of spirituality. The Beatitudes call on God's people to stand out as different from those around them, promising them that they will not be the ultimate losers (France, R.T. *The Gospel of Matthew* 158). The Beatitudes were simply revolutionary:

- If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.
(Matthew 5:39)
- If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. (v40)
- If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. (v41)
- Do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (v42)
- Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. (v43)
- Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (v48)
- When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. (Matthew 6:2)

The Sermon on the Mount was a teaching on perfect living, the way Jesus would have lived and in fact did live. John Wesley gave thirteen discourses on the Sermon on the

Mount. Wesley stated that the Sermon on the Mount described the way of salvation and the essence of Christian faith. He held the Sermon on the Mount in high esteem, describing it as “the whole religion,” “The sum of all true religion,” and “the religion of the heart.” (Headley, *Anthony Getting It Right: Christian Perfection and Wesley’s Purposeful List* Kindle 28) Repeatedly throughout the New Testament, Jesus contrasts Kingdom living with the religion of Israel, which was hypocritical, legalistic, and oppressive. Jesus summarizes all He teaches here in Matthew 5:48, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The phrase “you shall be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect” is synonymous with the Old Testament phrase “you shall be holy for the Lord your God is holy” (Leviticus 19:2) and “you shall be blameless before the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 18:13). As Israel was commanded to be holy by walking blamelessly and upright, children of the Kingdom of God are instructed to live their lives in a manner that emulates their Father. His perfect ways must be a model now for how to live and relate in relationships and with the outside world. (Osborn, *Grant Exegetical Commentary on Matthew* 214)

In the gospels Jesus taught many things about spiritual maturity and various elements that contribute to the spirituality of individuals. One sees these in emphases such as the heart, bearing fruit, abiding in him. and love.

The Heart. For one, Jesus spoke about a spirituality that first starts on the inside, as opposed to the Pharisees who were more concerned about their outward actions (Tenney, Merrill C. *New Testament Times* 93). Jesus did not have a problem with the Law. In fact, He honored the Law where possible, but what Jesus had an issue with was the letter of the Law. Jesus challenged the Jewish religion to consider the heart of the Law and not the

letter of the Law. For Jesus, character preceded conduct and the “why we do” before the “what we do.” The Jewish religion at the time placed heavy emphasis on actions and conduct while neglecting the quality of the inner life. It was easy to assume that as long as one followed the traditions, rules, and norms, that individual was spiritually mature. Jesus set about to correct this error. Jesus said that the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8); that even though a person does not engage in the act of adultery, he has already committed adultery in his heart if he has looked at a woman with lustful intent (Matthew 5:28), and that our heart is set on what we treasure (Matthew 6:21). Jesus also said that sinful actions such as evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, giving false testimony, and slander all originate from the heart (Matthew 15:19) and that good people store good things in their hearts, while evil people are those who fill their hearts with evil things. What comes out of the mouth is what is already stored in the hearts of people (Luke 6:45). Richard Forster elaborates on this further in his book *Streams of Living Water*, “the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees consisted primarily in externals that often involved manipulative control of other people. Instead of this sort of righteousness, Jesus points to an inner life with God that transforms the heart and builds deeply ingrained habits of virtue (Foster Kindle 7-8).

Wesley, like Jesus, placed great emphasis on the inward aspects of faith. Though not devaluing the external aspects of faith, Wesley contrasted the Pharisaic way of religion that focused on the externals with true Christian faith that was grounded in the internal attitudes of the heart (Headley 1 Kindle). For Wesley, a transformed heart birthed transformed behavior with right thinking, words, and action (Headley 2 Kindle)

Spiritual maturity must begin in the heart. The heart is the center of the being (Gk.2588. καρδία kardía) and the seat of all thoughts, desires, feelings, and attitudes. During the time of Jesus there was a lot of emphasis on outward acts, and it was in this setting that Jesus taught that cultivating an inner life and living from the inside out is what mattered. Spiritual growth begins with inner life, where one grows more and more to be like Christ, to have Christ-like thoughts, Christ-like aspirations, Christ-like attitudes, and a Christ-like conscience. People's hearts, the center of their lives, must mirror Christ. (Chan, Edmund. *Cultivating Your Inner Life* 90-91).

Bearing Fruit. Jesus also spoke about bearing fruit as evidence of spiritual maturity. Whether it be in the parable of the barren fig tree which failed to produce fruit of repentance (Luke 13:6-9) or when Jesus cursed the fig tree for its lack of fruit (Mark 11:12-14), bearing fruit was a key evidence of spiritual maturity. Jesus said that one can even discern good prophets from the false ones by their fruit. Every good tree bears good fruit, and every bad tree bears bad fruit. It is not possible for a tree to bear fruit that is not congruent with its nature and quality. The trees that do not bear fruit are useless and are of no value to the owner. Therefore, they should be cut down and thrown into the fire (Matthew 7:17-19).

Jesus' most striking teaching on fruit bearing is found in John chapter 15. The Greek word used for fruit is *karpos* (*Complete Word Study Bible Dictionary*). In John chapter 15 the fruit Jesus refers to is the fruit of the vine. A vine is planted solely for the purpose of bearing fruit. There are many varieties of fruit available for the vinedresser to choose from, hence, when he does select a particular variety, it is with the intention of producing the fruit he desires. The fruit that is produced is a result of the vine. In John

chapter 15, Jesus says the vinedresser or gardener is God Himself and Jesus is the vine. The disciples are the branches of the vine, and the purpose of them being part of the vine, that is, Jesus, is that they bear fruit and show the world that they are true disciples of Him (v8). If His disciples do not bear fruit, they are in danger of being cut off and thrown into the fire (v6). However, it is the Father's intention and purpose that disciples of Jesus Christ bear much fruit (v8). Fruit bearing is evidence of the health of the branch as well as it is the evidence of the quality and nature of the vine. A branch attached to a particular vine will bear fruit in keeping with the nature of that particular wine, and likewise, a disciple attached to the vine of Jesus will display spiritual growth in keeping with the likeness and nature of Jesus. In this passage, bearing fruit is a clear indication of spiritual maturity. The purpose of the branches, i.e. Jesus' disciples, is that they bear much fruit in keeping with the nature of the vine, which is Jesus. The fruit of their lives must be a reflection of Jesus. Jesus also teaches how his disciples can bear fruit by abiding in Him.

Abiding in Christ. Jesus explains explicitly that no one can bear Christ-like fruit without abiding in Him. On the contrary, if his disciples would remain in Him and Jesus Christ in them, they will bear much fruit. The phrase "in me" appears twenty-three times in the Gospel of John (Olive Tree NIV Concordance). It is not possible to talk about bearing Christ-like fruit without talking about "Abiding in Christ." The believer abides in Jesus (John 6:56, 14:20), and Jesus abides in the believer (6:56, 14:20, 15:5, 17:23, 17:26). The key to being fruitful disciples of Jesus Christ is to abide in Him and to maintain unbroken fellowship with Him (Spong, John S. *The Fourth Gospel. Tales of a Jewish Mystic* 314). The purpose of abiding in Jesus is so that His disciples may be fruitful, and the way to be

fruitful is for His disciples to abide in Him. This relationship is beautifully explained by Andrew Murray in his book *Abiding in Christ*:

He (the believer) not only grows in strength, the union with the Vine becoming ever surer and firmer, he also bears fruit, yea, much fruit. He has the power to offer that to others of which they can eat and live. Amid all who surround him he becomes like a tree of life, of which they can taste and be refreshed.....If Christ, the heavenly Vine, has taken the believer as a branch, then He has pledged Himself, in the very nature of things, to supply the sap and spirit and nourishment to make it bring forth fruit. "From ME is thy fruit found": these words derive new meaning from our parable. The soul need but have one care--to abide closely, fully, wholly. He will give the fruit. He works all that is needed to make the believer a blessing. (26)

Thus, Christian maturity involves growing in an always-abiding union with Jesus Christ and bearing fruit in keeping with His nature and likeness, and by that, being a blessing to those around for the glory of the Father.

Love. One of the key themes Jesus taught was love. At the heart of Jesus' life and ministry was the double commandment to love God and love one's neighbor as oneself (Burridge, Richard. *Imitating Jesus. An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* 50). When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus summarized all the commandments in the following manner, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40). Craig Blomberg states that "love is the

centerpiece of Jesus' ethic" and the core foundation of the Christian life (*Jesus and the Gospels* 388). In Jesus' teaching on the second commandment to love your neighbor as yourself there lies an embedded third commandment, where loving oneself is equally important and is the model that is used to love one's neighbor. The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself gradually intensified throughout Jesus' ministry. Jesus exhorted His listeners to love their neighbors as they would love themselves (Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, Luke 10:27), then elaborated that their neighbors included their enemies (Matthew 5:43, Luke 6:27, Luke 10:25-37), and then on the night of His betrayal, gave a new commandment to the disciples that they must love each other just as Jesus loves them (John 15:12). In John 15:17, Jesus links the command to love with the purpose of fruit-bearing by saying, "you did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit —fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another."

Loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself is a must-have character trait in an authentic disciple of Jesus and is evidence of Christian maturity. Wesley termed love as the "master-temper," that all other tempers (a habitual disposition) flowed down from (Headley Kindle 91). For Wesley, love was the very essence and foundation of his religion. Love was not just about a good feeling and nice sentiments. Love possessed a transforming power that enabled inner change which shaped behavior and brought about holiness in believers (Headley Kindle 94). Mildred Bangs Wynkoop says, "The summarizing word—Wesley's ultimate hermeneutic—is love. Every strand of his thought, the warm heart of every doctrine, the passion of every sermon, the test of every

claim to Christian grace, was love” (*A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism*, Kindle Loc 1698-1699). Love is vital to spiritual health and vitality. Love can grow cold inside a person even while outward religious acts appear correct or even exemplary (Strauch, Alexander. *Love or Die* 19), and the leaders of the Jewish religion at the time, the Pharisees, were the perfect example of this. Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that without love, their faith was useless. After this teaching on love, the following day Jesus demonstrated what real love was by His death. To grow in Christian maturity is to grow in love. Love is the essential inner character of Christ-likeness and His inner-likeness does not exist apart from love (Wynkoop Kindle Loc 366-367). Christian maturity cannot exist without love. These teachings take on new light as the church is birthed in the book of Acts and Christianity spreads across the region.

The Book of Acts

The book of Acts details the birth of the church at Pentecost and the explosive growth of the church after that eventful day. The Holy Spirit driven church in the book of Acts also details the lives of the early believers, the persecution they endured, and the hope that propelled them forward. There are many striking descriptions of people and people groups that testify to the life transformation in these people as a result of their conversions.

In passages like Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-36, one can see the first believers of the church in action, and what stands out is their radical lifestyles and their completeness as a community of believers. Their lives were marked by a distinctiveness that was both attractive to outsiders and threatening to the established religious and social order. There was radical transformation as individuals and as a community. Luke, as narrator, makes

clear that God approves of these happenings by concluding this passage by stressing that God added to their numbers daily (Blomberg, Craig *From Pentecost to Patmos* 29). This new life (5:20) was the evidence of a Christian.

There was also a great sense of holiness in the church, as seen in the story of Ananias and Sapphira and a powerful move of the Holy Spirit (5:12-16). When it came to choosing their first leaders, the twelve were careful to select spiritually mature leaders, full of faith and of the spirit (6:3-6). Stephen was described as a man full of grace and God's power (6:8), and Barnabas was described as a good man, full of faith, and of the Spirit (11:24). The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (11:26).

It would seem that in the Holy Spirit driven church of Acts, life transformation and spiritual growth were vibrant activities in the believers and, more specifically, its leaders. Of particular mention are the initial leaders, the description of Stephen (6:8) in chapter six, and the description of Barnabas in chapter eleven. The power of godly lives is striking. Godliness and integrity have a way of spreading in and through movements led by godly leaders (Fernando p357). The rapid growth of Christian maturity in the book of Acts was because of the work of the Holy Spirit and the godliness of the leaders of the movement. As the movement grew new challenges to Christian maturity emerged, which the epistle writers sought to address.

The Epistles

By the time the authors penned each of the inspired epistles, Christianity was spreading rapidly, and people from various ethnic backgrounds were coming to faith in Christ. From Jewish Christians to Greek and Roman Christians, there were understandably different worldviews influencing the key ideas of Christianity. While

Christianity was confined to more manageable geographical areas, it was easier to pass on information orally and to travel. However, the spread of the gospel far and wide, the persecution of the churches, an ever-growing church, and the infiltration of wrong doctrines and teachings like Gnosticism led to the writings of the epistles. Therefore, Christian maturity is one of the key objectives of the epistle writers, and the epistles provide a rich resource on Christian maturity (Keathley III, J. Hampton *Marks of Maturity; Biblical Characteristics of a Christian Leader 2*).

Christian Maturity: A New Life in Christ. The New Life in Christ can be summarized by Paul's statement, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The first reference to a new life is in Acts 5:20 when the Holy Spirit commanded the apostles to "Go, stand in the temple courts and tell the people all about this new life." The authors of the New Testament were very clear in their belief that a person who comes to faith in Christ is a new creation, created in the image of Christ. The old life is completely under the blood, and the new life birthed in Christ and lived in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit leads to a changed individual. Craig Keener commenting on the new life says,

Humanity's sin marred God's image in us, but in Christ we have been 'created' new in God's image (Ephesians 4:24). It is not without reason that Paul speaks of us as a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15). As a new creation we are the vanguard of God's coming new world (2 Peter 3:13-14; Revelation 21:1). We are also a new creation in the sense that what God did through Adam, he has done better through Jesus Christ the new Adam. (*Gift and Giver; The Holy Spirit for Today 73*)

Throughout the epistles, the writers compare the old life and the new life, associating worldly and sinful living with the old life and exhorting the believers to develop Christ-like qualities through the new life (Ephesians 4:20-22, Colossians 3:1-4, Colossians 3:9-10). Christian maturity begins when an individual puts their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. Paul says that those who put their trust in Jesus are buried with him and raised to a new life in Christ (Romans 6:4). They are “transferred” into the new age or new realm (Moo, Douglas J. *NIV Application Commentary Romans* 396). James expressed it as God giving the believers a new birth through the word of truth so that they will be the first fruits of all He created (James 1:18). Writing to the Ephesians, Paul exhorts the believers to let go of their former way of life, to put off their old self, and to be made new in the attitude of their minds. He exhorts them to put on the new self that is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:20 – 22). This new life in Christ Jesus has a new spirit, a new mind, a new heart, new perspectives, new hope, new purpose, and new living (Colossians 3:1-4, 1 Peter 1:3-9). All of these expressions indicate that inner change must take place, by the Holy Spirit-by Christ-by the Word, for one to enter into the Christian life. Therefore, Christian maturity begins with a new life in Christ and finds its completion in eternity. Though the believer continues to live in a decaying world that has beliefs, attitudes, thinking patterns, and worldly lifestyles contrary to the way of Christ, as each believer lives in Christ, each personal life is a representation of a time to come. Though ever-present and ever-pressing from all sides, the way of the world must not be allowed to press believers into its mold, because they are now people of a new age that Christ has inaugurated. So though they live in this old world, they must live out their lives based on the principles of

the new world (Moo 396). As George Eldon Ladd says, “The underlying idea is that while believers live in the old age, because they are in Christ they belong to the new age with its new creation and they are to live a life that is expressive of the new existence” (*A Theology of The New Testament* 523).

Christian Maturity: Growing in Christ. The Christian maturity journey begins with the dawn of a new life in Christ, but the process is a lifelong journey that ends when the believer is united with Christ (1 John 3:2, 1 Peter 1:13). Christian maturity is a life-long development process of becoming more and more like Jesus Christ through union with Him by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The entire New Testament assumes that a Christian is someone who grows towards Christian maturity (Smith, Kindle loc 101). This is the purpose for which believers, individuals, and collectively the church has been created for, that,

The body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

(Ephesians 4:15)

This life-long growing process does not take place automatically. It can only take place if the Christian yields his life, abides in Christ, and lets the Spirit of God form and develop Christ-like qualities in him. The term “in Christ” appears eighty-three times in the epistles (Complete Word Study Bible), and the authors of the epistles are very clear that there is no new life in Christ or any growth towards Christian maturity outside of Christ. The believers’ redemption is in Christ (Romans 3:24); they are sanctified in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:2), they are not condemned because they are in Christ (Romans 8:1); nothing can separate believers from God’s love that is in Christ (Romans 8:39), they are new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), their hope is in Christ (1 Corinthians 15); they have been reconciled with God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19); their victory is in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:4); every spiritual blessing is in Christ (Ephesians 1:3); the church is one in Christ (Romans 12:5), and all are equal in Christ (Galatians 6:15). Ladd, quoting Gustav Adolf Deissmann’s commentary on Pauline literature, explained the expression “in Christ” as one of mystical fellowship between a believer and Christ or, in the context of the church, believers in Christ. “In Christ” designates a conscious communion between Christ and His disciples (Ladd 523- 524).

Growing in Christian maturity is the purpose of the new life. The new life is not the end but the beginning. Ephesians 2:10 states that Christians are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for them to do, and that they are to adopt the same mind that is in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:5) and to live godly lives in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 3:12) until they reach perfection in Christ. This was the call to spiritual living across the epistles. Most often, using the concept of human growth, the epistle writers likened spiritual growth to the growth of humans. Paul exhorts

the Ephesian church to be no longer children but to grow up in Christ (Ephesians 4:14-15). Peter encouraged the believers to desire the pure milk of the Word so they may grow (1 Peter 2:2) and, in his second epistle, to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). There was also much rebuke when the writers encountered stunted spiritual growth. In Hebrews 5:12 – 6:1, the writer rebukes his readers for their lack of growth, lamenting as he writes ,

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore, let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity.

Paul was equally harsh on the Corinthian church in his first epistle for their lack of Christian maturity and even called them worldly, “Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly —mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready” (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). The understanding was that spiritual growth to greater Christian maturity was not an option. It was expected that everyone must grow in Christian maturity. A believer’s new life in Christ is not the end but a beginning; the election and calling in Christ and to Christ is for a particular life-long purpose: to maturity in Christ (Smith 20).

Christian Maturity: Expressed in Christian Living. If the beginning of Christian maturity is the new birth, and the purpose of new life is to grow in Christian maturity, the goal of Christian maturity is to become Christ-like (Romans 8:29). This became Paul's purpose in ministry as well. It was his desire to make everyone mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28).

One of the uniform themes of the entire New Testament is that the evidence of growing in Christian maturity is witnessed in the lifestyles of believers. Growing in Christian maturity is visible in changed behavior and ever developing Christ-like conduct in believers. Craig Keener says,

Having this new nature in us, we cannot be passive about our transformation. Paul tells us to put off the old self and put on the new creation in His image (Ephesians 4:22-24). Through a life of obedience (Ephesians 4:25-32), we can conform to the model and image of God in Christ (Ephesians 4:32-5:2) and the new nature becomes more and more a part of the way we live. (74)

The epistle writers were not just content about addressing the spiritual angles of Christian maturity, they went to great detail to explain what Christian living was and encouraged, exhorted, and even admonished the believers of the early church to live in that manner.

A survey through the epistles will reveal that every epistle contrasts the old life and the new life. For example, in Romans, Paul explains the theological underpinnings of the gospel in detail over the first eleven chapters of the book and in Romans twelve he urges the readers, in view of all that God has done for them, to offer their lives as living sacrifices. Urging them to be transformed by the renewing of their minds and by not conforming to the patterns of the world, Paul details what Christian living is practically.

The gospel that Paul believed in was deeply theological, but it was also very practical. The good news of Jesus Christ is intended to transform a person's life. Until individual Christians own and live out the theology, the gospel has not accomplished its purpose (Moo, Douglas. *Olive Tree NIV Application Commentary* Chapter 12). Paul encourages the believers in Rome to practice humility, to serve each other, to esteem one another above themselves, to use their gifts for the benefit of each other, to have sincere love for each other, to practice hospitality, to bless those who persecute, to live in harmony with one another, and to not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position (Romans 12).

This theme is seen across the rest of the epistles and was influenced in part by the popularity of Gnosticism, the heresy that separated spiritual from material/physical and made worldliness, in a sense, attractive. Gnosticism derives its name from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means knowledge, and a gnostic was saved by possessing hidden knowledge. Gnostics claimed to possess this hidden knowledge and presented themselves as the ones who knew better. Gnosticism borrowed from many traditions and religions, but its adoption of some Judaism made it particularly dangerous to the growing first century. Scholars recognize that Christianity's unique belief in a divine savior provided the catalyst for the Gnostic movement in the first two centuries. Many Gnostics traced their teaching back to Jesus and especially his teachings after the resurrection (though obviously heretical in interpretation). One of the most dangerous teachings of this heresy was that the spiritual and the physical were separate. The physical was evil and the spiritual good. The Gnostics had no issue with sinning and even had no problem with indulgence because it was part of the evil world and did not determine one's spiritual

state. The New Testament church found itself increasingly having to confront this heresy and deal with it in the strongest possible way (*Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* 422). Paul is harsh in his criticism of the Corinthian church as worldly because of rampant jealousy and quarreling (1 Corinthians 3:3). He confronts his opponents as one puffed up with knowledge (1 Corinthians 8:1) Much of the first letter to the Corinthian church is exposing their deception that even though they were a gifted church they had no right to feel superior because they were behaving like infants (1 Corinthians 3:1-4).

To the Colossians, in chapter three, Paul describes in great detail what kind of behavior accompanies the new life in Christ. He commands them imperatively to put to death the practices of the sinful nature associated with the old life and instead, to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. He encourages them to bear and forgive one another just as Christ has forgiven them and over all these virtues to put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:12-14).

In Galatians, Paul exhorts his readers to walk by the Spirit and refuse to gratify the desires of the flesh. Paul then proceeds to detail what the sinful nature is and the sinful lifestyle it manifests in people. In contrast, Paul speaks about the fruit of the spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Paul sums up his address on Christian living by saying those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5: 13-25). Every epistle addresses the theme that Christian maturity translates into changed lives and Christ-like behavior. Christian maturity expressed in Christian living was an important

theme in every epistle. (Eph. 4:12f; Phil. 3:12f; Col. 1:28; 4:12; 1 Cor. 2:6, 16f; Jam. 1:2; Rom. 8:28-29; 1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18).

The Disciplines of Spiritual Formation Practiced in the New Testament

It is evident that there were certain spiritual disciplines that were practiced intentionally and effectively to develop the kind of spiritual maturity in these first believers.

Prayer. Prayer is a key discipline in the book of Acts and is mentioned eighteen times (*Olive Tree NIV Concordance*). Jesus Himself taught and modelled prayer and his prayer life had such an influence on his disciples that they came and asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). The longest prayer recorded in the Bible was Jesus' prayer on the night of His betrayal (John 16-17) and before His ascension when he instructed the disciples to remain in Jerusalem. The book of Acts records that they remained together in Jerusalem and joined constantly together in prayer (Acts 1:14). The day of Pentecost was birthed in a prayer meeting in the upper room, and the early church was marked by prayer. Prayer is a key theme in Acts and is a key reason to the expansion of the church (Block, Darrel L. *A Theology of Luke and Acts* 700).

As a spiritual discipline, the epistle writers encouraged the believers to devote themselves to prayer (Colossians 4:2), to pray in the spirit on all occasions (Ephesians 6:18), to pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17), to be alert and of sober mind so that they may pray (1 Peter 4:7), to be faithful in prayer, and to not be anxious about anything but to pray in every situation. Paul instructed Timothy to encourage all men to pray everywhere with uplifted hands (1 Timothy 2:8), and James encouraged anyone in trouble to pray. James goes on to detail that prayer is a vital ministry of the church, if

anyone is sick they should be anointed with oil and prayed for by the laying of hands by the elders. If someone had sinned, they were encouraged to confess and pray for each other, affirming that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:13-17). It is very evident that prayer was one of the key spiritual disciplines practiced by the New Testament church and one that contributed to the growing spiritual maturity of the believers.

Fasting. In the gospels, fasting seemed to be a discipline that is practiced by many. The first mention of fasting in the New Testament is the widow Anna's fasting. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. In Luke 18, the rich young ruler mentions that he fasts twice a week. This could imply that fasting was a regular practice of the Jewish religion. In Matthew 6:16-18 Jesus does not talk about whether to fast or pray but rather the motive and attitude when fasting, as it seems that Jesus was more concerned about how a person fasts rather than if he fasts or not (v16). Jesus also tends to imply that fasting is a very personal matter when he says, "when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you" (v17). However, though Jesus Himself practiced fasting when He faced Satan in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-4) and mentioned that some spiritual battles can only be overcome with prayer and fasting (Mark 9:29), Jesus never commanded fasting and in one reference, His disciples were accused of not fasting like others (Matthew 9:14).

In the book of Acts, though fasting is mentioned only twice both references are very important to what was taking place in the church at the time. The first reference to

fasting is in chapter 13. “while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So, after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (13:2-3). The commissioning of Barnabas and Saul, effectively the Senior Pastor and the Associate Pastor of the Antioch church, for missions is a significant event in the Book of Acts. This event occurred during a time of earnest community fasting and prayer. Ajith Fernando commenting on this verse states, “Five words. They characterize the missionary program of this church; prayer, fasting, guidance, release, and commissioning. These features come from an earnestness to know God and obey God’s will, which allows the Holy Spirit to superintend the whole process (*NIV Application Commentary on Acts 377*).

The second reference to fasting occurs on their return to Antioch after the first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas visited each of the churches they planted to encourage the believers to remain in the faith and to appoint elders in each of the churches. This key commissioning of leaders was done with prayer and fasting (14:23), and it is of importance to note that this was done in each church.

There is not one mention of fasting in the epistles, which is interesting indeed. Two explanations could arise out of the fact that fasting was not important and therefore not commanded or that fasting was a regular practice that did not require mentioning. According to the *Didachē*, fasting was a regular practice of believers, who fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>). As in the Old Testament, fasting was not something someone did in absence of prayer but, rather, to empower prayer. Fasting had purpose, which was to

humble the believer before the Lord and to emphasize the intensity of the prayer and the seriousness of the need at hand.

Scripture. The New Testament believers did not have the twenty-seven books of the New Testament that is available today. Instead, their scriptures were “The Tenakh” (the Jewish Bible) and “The Didachē” (the apostles teaching). As the years went on, each of the epistles became regular reading when received. The first believers devoted themselves to the scriptures and the apostles’ teachings (Acts 2:42). When the day-to-day ministry of a vibrant and growing church caused tension, the apostles were not willing to neglect the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:20) and instead delegated the ministry to the believers to be trusted leaders so that the primacy of the Word would be protected.

Throughout the New Testament, the believers are encouraged to hold firmly to the Word (Philippians 2: 14-16), to beware of contrary teaching (Romans 16:17), to let the word dwell in them richly and to teach and instruct one another in it (Colossians 3:16), to protect themselves with the word of God (Ephesians 6:17), to humbly accept the word and obey it (James 1:21-22), and to learn and be encouraged by the scriptures (Romans 15:4).

In his letters to Timothy, Paul urged his disciple to do his best to present himself as one who can handle the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:1), that it is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:15-16). Timothy was also encouraged to devote himself to the reading of scripture publicly and to teaching and preaching it (1 Timothy 4: 13). The Berean Jews were commended for the eagerness in which they received the gospel and how they examined the scriptures daily to authenticate the gospel.

It is clearly evident that the scriptures and the apostles teachings (and later their epistles) were received, read, obeyed, and practiced. The scriptures were also used to discern and evaluate the various teachings that false teachers tried to influence the church with. This kind of devotion to the scriptures greatly contributed to the spiritual formation of the early church. Devotion and openness to the Word is key evidence that one is truly regenerated (Fernando 132).

Theological Foundations for Spiritual Formation to Strengthen Christian Maturity

The theological foundation for this study flows naturally out of the preceding biblical foundations and has three main thrusts.

1. Christian Maturity is not possible without union in Christ.

The entire purpose of Christian maturity is to become more and more Christ-like and to find completion and wholeness in Him. This is not possible without Jesus because in its very essence, Christian maturity is an activity of God that is carried out by the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit as one abides in the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The words of Jesus in John 15:15 is as clear as it gets, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

The world offers many ways for people to mature emotionally, physically, mentally, socially, and even spiritually, but no one can mature spiritually in a Christian sense without a harmonious relationship with Christ. It is possible to follow a pattern of religious customs, traditions, and rules, but without an active and vibrant relationship with Christ, it will all amount to religiosity without life.

The context of the conversation that Jesus has with His disciples in John 15:5 is that it was the last night before His death. Jesus has celebrated the Passover with His disciples; Judas has left to betray Jesus, and Jesus, along with the rest of His disciples, makes his way to Gethsemane. It is in these moments that Jesus shares His most intimate teaching with His disciples. In this passage of scripture Jesus states that the Father is the vinedresser, Jesus, the vine, and His disciples, the branches. The symbol of the vine would have resonated with the disciples because the vine and vineyard were symbols associated with Israel from the Old Testament (Burge, Gary M. *NIV Application Commentary John* 417). For example, the Psalmist speaks of Israel as a vine that was taken out of Egypt (Psalm 80:8) and instructs the reader to turn and look upon Israel, the vine, with favor (v14). Isaiah shares God's lament for His vineyard, Israel, who has failed to produce the fruit of justice and righteousness that He desired and instead has produced bloodshed and outcry (Isaiah chapter 5). In Jeremiah 2:21, God, speaking through Jeremiah, asks Israel why they became a degenerate vine. Therefore, the disciples being familiar with these scriptures would have understood what Jesus meant when using the symbol of the vine. Jesus is trying to show them that He is now the true vine (John 15:1,5) and invites them, the branches, to abide in Him. Preceding this invitation, Jesus speaks about the unity He has with the Father (John 14:7-11), and it is this union between the Father and Son that Jesus desires for His disciples to have in Him (Guthrie, Donald, *New Testament Theology* 642).

If believers, as His disciples, abide in Him, they will bear much fruit, but apart from Him, they can do nothing. In the first eleven verses of John 15, Jesus uses the word "abide" ten times! The Greek word for abide is *ménō* (Strong 3306), which means to

remain, abide, dwell, and live. Jesus wants people to remain, dwell, live, and abide in Him and He in them. As the vine is the source of life, giving nourishment to the branches, Jesus is the life-giving source to people's lives. As Jesus abides in the Father and the Father in Him, when people abide in Jesus, He abides in them and gives them complete access to the divine power that produces Christ-like fruit in their lives. If the branch is disconnected from the vine, it will wither and die, but as long as the branch is connected to the vine, it will never lack nourishment. The purpose of this union is for fruit-bearing in keeping with the life-giving source that the vine provides. Andrew Murray in his book *Abide in Christ* states it this way,

The parable teaches us the object of the union. The branches are for fruit and fruit alone. "Every branch that beareth not fruit He taketh away." The branch needs leaves for the maintenance of its own life, and the perfection of its fruit: the fruit itself it bears to give away to those around. As the believer enters into his calling as a branch, he sees that he has to forget himself, and to live entirely for his fellowmen. To love them, to seek for them, and to save them, Jesus came: for this every branch on the Vine has to live as much as the Vine itself. It is for fruit, much fruit, that the Father has made us one with Jesus (32).

Jesus' invitation to a deep intimate relationship of abiding is the foundation for developing Christian maturity. In fact, one can determine that without an intimate relationship with Jesus, there is absolutely no possibility of producing Christ-like fruit in life. Jesus, as the vine, is the life source that flows into all people, who are the branches. The branches produce whatever the life coursing through its limbs desires (Burge 418). While Jesus says it is impossible to bear Christ-like fruit without abiding in Him, His

promise is that if people abide in Him and His Words abide in them, they can ask whatever they wish, and it will be done for them (John 15:7). The power of production is not in the branch, just as the power to live the Christian life is not in the individual but in Christ. Apart from Him one can do nothing and, in fact, is nothing (Smith, James B. *The Good and Beautiful God* 159).

The apostle Paul wrote about this mystical union in Christ throughout his epistles. The concept of the new life “in Christ” was central to Paul’s gospel. The phrase, “in Christ,” appears eighty-three times in his literature, as well as another forty-seven “in the Lord” phrases. The phrase “in Christ” emphasizes or deeply connects the Christian with Christ. The Christian not only belongs to Christ, but in a sense, is “in Christ,” where he is united to Christ, joined with Christ, and belongs to Christ (Lloyd-Jones, Martin *God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians* 31).

John, many years later, continued to stress the importance of this union in his later epistles. The idea of abiding appears eight times in his epistle 1 John (1 John 2:6, 24, 27, 28, 3:6, 24, 4:12-13, 15-16), underlying the importance of identification in Christ and the source of power for new life (Burridge 643). To be a Christian means that one is not only a believer in Christ, outside Him, but one is a believer joined to Him and “in Him” (Lloyd-Jones 32).

Therefore, the journey to spiritual formation is a journey undertaken by abiding deeply and intimately in Christ. The more believers abide, the deeper they grow in intimacy, and the more their lives begin to mirror His. Their inner lives begins to have Christ-like compulsions and aspirations, with Christ-like convictions and with a Christ-like conscience, and as these fruit mature and grow, from their innermost beings will flow

rivers of living water, fruit that others will be blessed by. This is what it means to abide in Jesus! (Chan 90-91). Christianity is not just about believing the right things or living the right way. Though these are definitely important, Christianity must be more than just that. Christianity must be about a deep, supernatural, mystical experience and relationship with the Divine and having the Divine living inside and living inside the Divine. It is this life-giving connection that influences and nurtures beliefs and lives. (Burge 426)

1. Spiritual Formation is a long-long journey that involves the practice of spiritual disciplines to strengthen Christian maturity.

Christian maturity is not a one-off moment in the life of a person but a journey that begins the day that person comes to faith in Jesus Christ. Christ-likeness will be attained, in a complete sense, upon the return of Jesus, yet God desires that believers pursue Christ-likeness in this life and grow in Christ-likeness as they live and wait for His return (Whitney, Donald *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* Kindle 2).

While it is true that the Lord who begins a new work in the life of a believer will bring it to completion (Galatians 6:10), growing in Christian maturity involves the active consent, willingness, and yielding of the believer to the activity of God through the Holy Spirit. The process of transformation does not depend on the individual, but the decision and willingness to let God in, does. (Keener 72). This process is a life-long journey, involving day-to-day decision making and progressive transformation into the image of Christ. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg says,

Christianity is about a way of life, a path, and it has been from its very beginning.

At the center of Jesus' own teaching is the notion of a "way" or a "path", and the

first name of the early Christian movement was “the Way.” (*The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* Kindle loc 430-433)

From the time of the Old Testament, spiritual people have walked “this way,” i.e. the way of the Lord. The first reference to the “way” is in Genesis 18:19 when God says that He has chosen Abraham that He may command His household and children to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that God could fulfill what He has promised Abraham. The Hebrew word used here for “way” is *derek* (h1870), which is often used figuratively throughout the Old Testament with reference to a person’s course of life, with accompanying habits, choices, and actions (*Complete Word Study Bible of the Old Testament, Mac OS version*). Bruce Waltke and James Archibald Houston, commenting on Psalm 1, describe it further,

In a figurative sense, “way” evokes three notions. 1. Course of life i.e. character and context of life, 2. Conduct of life i.e. specific choices and behavior 3. Consequences of that conduct i.e. the inevitable destiny of such a lifestyle. In short, “way” is a metaphor for the deed-destiny nexus. (Waltke Bruce, Houston James A., Moore Erika, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* 134-135)

The way is a journey of life, a journey that involves making choices that determine personal destiny, and a journey of transformation. It is a journey where as one draws closer to God, one is transformed to be more like God.

The Old Testament specifically talks about “the ways of the Lord” as in 2 Samuel 22:22, where King David says, “*For I have kept the ways of the Lord and have not wickedly departed from my God*” or when the writer in 2 Chronicles 17:6 writes about

King Jehoshaphat as one whose “heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord.” Hosea, in his parting words, says, “*for the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them*” (14:9).

The Psalms present two ways to travel, as for example, in Psalm 1: The way of the righteous (1:8) as opposed to the way of the wicked (1:1). The way of the righteous reflects godly character in how the blessed person chooses not to walk in the counsel of the wicked nor stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers but instead chooses to delight in the law of the Lord. Righteous character is contrasted with the way of the wicked whose behavior does not reflect God’s.

The lifestyles of godly kings like David, Jehoshaphat, and Asa were the benchmark that other kings were judged by. They were commended when their lives, spirituality, and reign as kings were similar to that of the godly kings, but those who did not follow the ways of the Lord and the ways of the godly kings were portrayed as wicked (2 Chronicles 21:12, 22:3, 28:2, 34:2).

The New Testament also speaks about “the way.” In John 14:6, Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth and the life.” The new movement in the book of Acts was called “the way,” *hē hodos* (Strong 3598). The woman with the divination spirit in Acts 16 identified Paul as one who knew the way of salvation. Aquila and Priscilla taught Apollos the ways of the Lord (Acts 18:26). In Acts 24:14, Christianity is referred to as “the way” and later in verse 22, Luke mentions that Felix had an accurate knowledge of “the way.” Jesus came to show believers the way; he is the way and invites them to follow Him in the way.

Spiritual formation is a way, a journey that begins with a Christian's conversion and ends when the Christian is united with Christ. In this journey, the Christian is expected to become more and more Christ-like as He journeys in life and the way. The scriptures affirm that once individuals come into a relationship with God, they will leave the life of old and begin life anew (Romans 6:3-5). This pattern is clear right across Scripture from the Old Testament to the New. The Old Testament narrative is essentially about a God who forms for Himself a people who are called to be holy because He is holy. Israel becomes the people of God and that is their identity, and because they are His people and He, their God, they are called to live true to their identity, to reflect God's character in every sphere of their lives (Smith 17-18).

The New Testament builds on this narrative. In Romans 12: 1 Paul urges his readers to offer their lives as living sacrifices to God in view of His great mercy extended to them. He urges them to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. Paul's letter to the Colossians is a call to spiritual maturity from beginning to end. He exhorts his recipients who, after having come to faith in Christ, must grow up in their faith, and be rooted and anchored in Christ (Smith 19).

As stated before, spiritual formation is not a one-time event but a life-long process of developing Christian maturity through the inner work of the Holy Spirit who transforms the Christian to become Christ-like. This journey, however, does not happen automatically. It requires the continual abiding in Christ, the constant yielding to the Spirit, the making of intentional choices, and the practice of disciplines that develop Christian maturity. N. T. Wright says,

The qualities of character which Jesus and his first followers insist on as the vital signs of healthy Christian life don't come about automatically. You have to develop them. You have to work at them. You have to think about it, to make conscious choices to allow the Holy Spirit to form your character in ways that, to begin with, seem awkward and "unnatural" (*After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* Kindle 27-28).

The practice of disciplines that promote spiritual growth are essential for the spiritual formation process. Spiritual disciplines are those practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Whitney 4). These are activities undertaken to bring believers into more effective cooperation with Christ and His kingdom (Willard 156). As Paul encouraged Timothy to train himself for godliness (1 Timothy 4:7), the practice of certain disciplines that are seen in the lives of Jesus, Paul, and other biblical characters will enable others to aspire to the lives they led. Dallas Willard in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* writes, "My central claim is that we can become like Christ by doing one thing – by following Him in the overall lifestyle of life He chose for Himself" (*The Spirit of the Disciplines* Kindle Loc 92).

Over the years, there have been various opinions about what these disciplines are. Authors such as Dallas Willard, Richard Forster, and Donald Whitney have given extensive lists of the spiritual disciplines. Dallas Willard divides these disciplines into those of abstinence and engagement. The disciplines of abstinence include solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice. The disciplines of engagement include study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission (157-158). Richard Forster on his webpage *Renovarè*

(<https://renovare.org/about/ideas/spiritual-disciplines>) lists twelve disciplines of meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. Donald S. Whitney lists the personal disciplines as scripture intake, prayer, worship, evangelism, service, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, journaling and learning (7). The extent of transformation the Christian will experience through the practice of those disciplines is solely up to the initiative of the individual (Willard 68).

2. The Goal of Christian Maturity is finding completion in Jesus Christ.

If the beginning of the journey in Christian maturity is a new life in Christ and the continuation of that journey is through abiding in Him and growing in Him, then the goal of that journey is finding completion or perfection in Him. This is God's great plan that Paul speaks of in Romans 8:28-30,

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Speaking of how God works in and through life's challenges for the person's benefit, Paul then elaborates on God's masterplan, which is, that God has predestined those who have chosen Him to be conformed into the image of His Son. The Greek word used here is *summorphos* (Strong 4832), meaning to be made into, to be made like (Complete Word Study Bible Dictionary) the image of His Son. This is not just spiritually but physically

too as Paul describes in Philippians 3:20-21, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

The goal of Paul’s ministry was to present everyone perfect in Christ (Colossians 1:28). The Greek word used for perfect is the word *téleios* (Strong 5046) which comes from the word *télos* (G5056), and its meaning includes goal, purpose, completed, finished, that which has reached its end, and wanting in nothing. It was Paul’s ministry purpose to present all believers complete in Christ. That was the reason for his proclaiming, admonishing, teaching, and instruction ministry (Colossians 1:28). In Ephesians 4:11-16 Paul, speaking of the five-fold ministry of the church, says that God gave the five-fold ministries to equip the saints for all ministry so as to build up the body of Christ to unity of faith and perfection (*teleios*) of faith into the fullness of Christ. This growing up process is the opposite of being immature like children and being “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Ephesians 4:16). In Galatians 4:19, Paul is in deep anguish, as if in childbirth, longing until Christ is formed (*morphó* G3444) in the believers of Galatia. This verb appears only once in the New Testament (here in Gal. 4:19), with its intent of meaning as the Christian described as a little child who needs to mature until the very image of Christ be impressed upon his heart (*Complete Word Study Bible Dictionary*). This was heart of Paul’s ministry, to not just proclaim the gospel, but to build believers up in faith so that they can be formed into the image of Christ, growing in Christian maturity until they are perfected in Christ.

Hebrews has much to say about perfection. Jesus is the model of perfection and the founder of salvation (2:10). Believers must leave the elementary teaching and go on to maturity (6:1), to fix their eyes on Jesus as He is the founder and perfecter of faith (12:2), and to run the race that is set before them. To the writer of Hebrews, Jesus is the founder and perfecter of faith, and He (Jesus) will make Christians perfect, but at the same time, in the next few verses, the writer exhorts “strive for holiness” because without holiness no one will see God, (12:14). He then details a whole range of actions and behaviors that must mark the lives of Christians. At the end of the epistle, the author ends with a benediction praying that each believer will be made perfect in every good work to do the will of Christ (13:20). The writer of Hebrews presents this dual tension seen in the other epistles of the New Testament too, that while Christ has sanctified the believers by His own blood (13:12) and will make their faith complete in the end, the believers must set perfection as a goal to strive for and pursue, with the powerful indwelling help and working of the Holy Spirit. Just because the goal is difficult does not mean it should not be a goal. The writer does not suggest a sinless perfection and there will be divine provision for lapses, but, at the same time, the author sees nothing short of perfection as the Christian’s goal (Guthrie, Donald *New Testament Theology* 673-674).

This was Jesus instructions to his disciples too: “you therefore must be perfect” (*téleios*), “as your heavenly Father is perfect” (*téleios*). The word *teleios* has similar meaning to the Old Testament word *tāmîm* (GK 9459) which means to be blameless or without defect. In Genesis 6:9 it says that, “Noah was a righteous man, blameless (*tāmîm*) in his generation. Noah walked with God.” In Genesis 17:1, the scripture says, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God

Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless” (*tāmîm*). *Tāmîm* is used extensively in Exodus and Leviticus when describing unblemished sacrifices that were to be offered to the Lord (Exodus 12:4, 29:5, Leviticus 1:3, 3:1, 3:9, 4:3). A variation of *tāmîm* is also used to describe Job as blameless, and David, in his song of praise, sings about how God shows Himself blameless to the blameless (2 Samuel 22:26). In the Psalms, the world *tāmîm* is used to describe the righteous and those who walk upright and blameless (Goldingay 600). *Tāmîm* and *teleios* carry similar meanings, and they are a part of similar ideas across the scriptures. God desired Israel to be holy because He is holy, to be blameless because He is blameless, to live, act, behave, and reflect in their character His character, so that the nations will see in them their covenant God. This is the same plan of God seen in the New Testament. God, through His Son, has redeemed a people who He has predestined to be conformed into the image of His Son, to abide in His Son, to grow into maturity by being spiritually formed daily to become more and more mature and Christ-like with the goal of being made complete and perfect in Christ. John Wesley, in his sermon on Christian Perfection, said “Christian perfection is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing” (*The Essential Works of John Wesley* 401). Becoming Christ-like is, in a sense, about being holy. “Be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44, 45, 19:2, 20:26, 21:8, 1 Peter 1:16) and “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48) carry similar meaning. Holiness is a characteristic of every Christian. If they are not holy, their profession of Christ is valueless. One cannot be a believer without being holy, and one cannot be holy in the New Testament without being a believer (Lloyd-Jones 34).

Historical Foundations for Spiritual Formation to Strengthen Christian Maturity

As detailed above, Christian maturity does not happen automatically. The spiritual formation process and the practice of the disciplines that aid the formation process to strengthen Christian maturity are intentional exercises requiring commitment and obedience. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, there is an intentional God-given mandate to teach, instruct, and encourage the people of God to grow into greater Spiritual maturity. Over the years there have been many key figures and practices that have given importance to spiritual formation, the disciplines, and Christian maturity. Many priestly orders were especially influential and contributed much to spiritual formation. In terms of influencing the spiritual development of laity, this section will briefly explore the practice of the catechesis and its influence on the spiritual formation of believers. It will also briefly explore John Wesley's influence on the spiritual formation of believers during the evangelical revival, especially his teachings and practices that contributed to the spiritual formation of his believers in the Methodist movement.

Catechesis

The word catechesis is derived from the Greek word *katēcheō* (Strong 2596-2279) which literally means to echo, to sound towards and resound. More broadly it means to teach, instruct, inform by word of mouth, or indoctrinate. It is one of many words in the New Testament used for "teaching" and is biblical in origin (Packer, J. I. *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old-Fashioned Way* Kindle 27). The Catechesis was a form of Christian religious education which taught and instructed the essential doctrines of the Christian faith to new converts of Christianity. It was practiced to ensure that new converts knew the core beliefs and were grounded in the faith before being fully accepted

to the local church body. Depending on which local church one belonged to, Christian Catechesis would include teaching the basic essentials of the faith including the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, the teachings of the apostles, the teaching and memorization of the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and a basic knowledge of the sacraments (Parrett, Gary A.; Kang, S. Steve. *Teaching the Faith, Forming the Faithful: A Biblical Vision for Education in the Church* 88 Kindle). As the church spread far and wide, people from diverse backgrounds were coming to faith. In order to ensure their motives were authentic and that the new believers were deeply rooted in their new faith, catechesis became the primary form of instruction and teaching. (Maddox, Randy. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* 216 Kindle).

A new convert was referred to as "catechumen" and catechized (instructed) in the basic elements of the faith. This instruction would last for many weeks and would consist of preaching, teaching, and evaluation meetings. The catechesis would involve theoretical instruction and practical application. As the catechesis model developed and became formal, it was used specifically in preparing the catechumen for baptism on Easter (Wilken 24).

The Catechesis functioned in three primary ways. First, it was preached and taught from the pulpit. For example, Ambrose's homilies, "*On the Mysteries*," preached in the 4th century, belong to a genre of writings known as catechetical homilies. These were sermons preached by the Bishops to men and women who were to be baptized at Easter (Wilken, Robert L. *Tutoring the Affections: Liturgy and Christian Formation in the Early Church* 21 2003). Second, the Catechesis was taught in homes, from parents to children. This was a critical area of teaching, and it also ensured that faith prevailed in the

home and that faith was passed down from one generation to another (Wilken 23). Third, the Catechesis was taught in formal classes especially for the process of baptizing new believers and welcoming them into the church family. The baptism event would be preceded by teachings, various prayers, the laying of hands, exorcisms, and inquiries to determine if a catechumen was ready for baptism. (Wilken 23)

The catechesis was very successful in ensuring the new converts were given a solid grounding in the faith and had enough time to consciously think and evaluate their conversion experience while also causing great anticipation for the catechumen as they prepared for baptism. (Berard L. Marthaler, *Catechesis: A Semantic Evolution Scholarly Update* p.1 Liturgical Ministry Winter 2009). The Catechesis flourished between the second and fifth centuries, but the practice began to decline thereafter. Many reasons have been given for the decline. The Barbarian invasions were influential in the general decline of religious education in general. A significant event was the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire which created connection between baptism and citizenship. Augustine's claim that infants needed to be baptized to remove the guilt of original sin had a strong influence on the rise of infant baptisms. The practice of infant baptism as the dominant pattern of Christian initiation thus had a strong influence on the catechesis, as people simply assumed they were Christians from their childhood and while the catechesis still functioned, it no longer had the same impact and priority in the church. The spread of Christianity to rural areas then contributed to a more decentralized structure of ministry because it became impossible for the bishop to be present everywhere. Unfortunately, with decentralization the effective function of religious education did not take place. The setting in of the dark ages brought upon a

general neglect of all things sacred and the catechumenal structure fell into disuse (Maddox Kindle 216).

During the reformations, leaders of the reform period, like Luther and Calvin, called for the restoration of the catechesis to its rightful place and even produced catechesis manuals (Packer, 23). Martin Luther produced the small catechism in question-and-answer format in 1529 and later on a much more in-depth catechism. Such was the importance of the catechesis to these leaders of the reformation, that John Calvin, writing to the Lord Protector of England in 1548, wrote, “believe me, Monseigneur, the church of God will never be persevered without catechesis” (Packer 23). The catechisms of Luther were structured around the ten commandments, the Apostle’s Creed, the Lord’s prayer, and the sacraments. Calvin structured his catechisms similarly and called his instructions of the sacraments and articles of faith common to all Christians.

There is much confusion with regard to catechism among the modern protestant church as many view catechisms as something of a catholic tradition. However, catechism finds its roots in scripture and was passed down from the early church (Packer 24). Acts 2:42 illustrates that from the early church itself there was a process of passing down the essentials of the faith. Then the epistles contributed to the teaching and instruction and traditions of the early church, before the early church fathers took on the mantle. During the first centuries and then again during and after the reformation, the catechesis was immensely successful in the spiritual formation of believers and contributed greatly to the spiritual growth of the church. Its neglect is to the church’s disadvantage, and there has been a recent and growing voice to bring this kind of instruction and teaching back to the center of church life. The context of this research

study will greatly benefit from the practice of a catechesis, given that 99% of the members of the churches are first generation Christians.

John Wesley's Teaching on Spiritual Formation and Christian Maturity

John Wesley was born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley in 1703 and died in Lincolnshire, England. He passed on into eternity in 1791 and in the space of his lifetime raised 294 preachers ministering to 71,668 members with 19 missionaries in England, and a further 198 preachers and 43,265 members in America (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/denominationalfounders/john-wesley.html>). He is one of the modern fathers of the faith and one of the most influential voices of Christian Theology. His beliefs, teachings, and practices were instrumental in the rapid growth of the Methodist movement, which was a movement that was well-grounded and had intentional spiritual formation practices and structures to develop Christian maturity in the believers. Therefore, Wesley's teachings on spiritual formation, the practices of spiritual disciplines, and Christian maturity have been very influential over the years. John Wesley's salvation experience took place in 1736, and in the lead up to this experience Wesley spent considerable time with the Moravian brotherhood and was greatly helped by Moravian pastor Peter Böhler. As an Anglican minister, his Anglican roots and Moravian influence had bearing on his theology (Russie Ed. *The Essential Works of John Wesley* Kindle 11).

Wesley's sermon *The Scripture Way of Salvation* outlines his concept and belief about salvation. (*The Complete Works of John Wesley: Volume 1, Sermons 1-53* Kindle Loc 11415-11416). In answering the question "what is salvation?" Wesley goes on to explain that salvation is not going to heaven or finding eternal happiness; it is not the soul

going to paradise, and it is not something in the distance. Commenting on Ephesians 2:8, Wesley argues that salvation is the entire work of God from “the first dawning of grace” until the soul is consummated in glory, it is a blessing given to people through God’s free mercy, and it is to be experienced in the present, through faith (Russie Ed 148).

Wesley divided the salvation experience into two parts: justification and sanctification. Wesley saw justification and salvation not as separate aspects, but rather as two aspects of one truth (Wynkoop, Kindle Loc 296-297). Wesley elaborated that justification is God accepting believers by forgiving them of all sin by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ. Justification is instantaneous, and the immediate effects of justification is the peace of God which surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7), the hope of God’s glory (Romans 5:2), and inexpressible joy (1 Peter 1:8). Sanctification, Wesley explains, begins on the same day as justification when the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within and the believer is inwardly renewed. Sanctification is not instantaneous but a gradual transformation process from then until recovering fully the likeness of God. Wesley encourages Christians to go from grace to grace, to abstain from all appearance of evil, and to take up the cross daily and let the Spirit work within as they walk blamelessly, worshiping Him in spirit and truth, and doing good to all men as they journey to gradually recover the likeness of God within. Wesley detailed the various stages of the salvation process in a meeting in 1746, where he stated that human salvation by faith involved three dimensions; pardon, salvation begun; holiness, salvation continued, and heaven, salvation completed. (Russie Ed. 879). This journey does not happen automatically but by responsible participation in God’s grace in the lives of believers (Maddox Kindle 148).

Wesley was very concerned about inner holiness, not just outward acts and rituals. Not that he considered outward acts irrelevant, but he refused to confine holiness to external actions such as not sinning and doing good to others. Wesley's concern with the models of Christian life that he saw among his fellow Anglicans was that they were too focused on outward matters but neglected the inner dimensions of human life. By contrast, Wesley's definition of sanctification emphasized the importance of the "inward" dimension of believers, described in such terms as "the life of God in the [human] soul, a participation of the divine nature, the mind that was in Christ, or the renewal of our heart after the image of [God who] created us" (Maddox Kindle 178).

Another important sermon that Wesley preached was his sermon on *Christian Perfection* (*The Complete Works of John Wesley: Volume 1, Sermons 1-53* Kindle Loc 10535-10536). Because there was much debate about this particular topic and Wesley himself had his opponents, in this sermon Wesley states in what ways Christians can be perfect and in what ways they cannot be perfect. Wesley states that Christians are not perfect in that they do not know everything, they can make mistakes, they can be tempted, and they are not free from infirmities. Wesley then argues that perfect is the same as holiness and is just another word for it. He then claims that "A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin" (Russie Ed. 410). A Christian can be free from evil thoughts and evil tempers. By tempers, Wesley means a habitual disposition of a person (Maddox 69). Wesley then brings his sermon to a close by saying,

Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, both in the Law and in the Prophets, and having the prophetic word confirmed to us in the gospel by our blessed Lord and His apostles, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh

and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. And, with so many promises being made to us of entering into His rest—which one who has entered has ceased from his own works—let us fear lest any of us should come short of it. This one thing, then, let us do: forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, let us press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus; crying to Him day and night till we also are delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God! (*The Essential Works of John Wesley* 414).

Wesley's concept of perfection was that it was dynamic and always changing in nature. Perfection was a part of the sanctification process and growing in holiness was in a sense Christian perfection. However, to talk about Christian perfection, according to Wesley, and not talk about love is wholly inadequate, for Wesley consistently described love in a manner that placed it at the very center of Christian perfection (Headley Kindle 90). Wesley consistently defined holiness, as well as perfection, as love (Wynkoop Kindle Loc 366-368).

Since love was the essence of the Christian life, perfection was manifested in love. In his words, it is “love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in everything giving thanks” (*The Essential Works of John Wesley* 150). Wesley considered love as a master temper from which all other tempers flow (Headley Kindle 9). A complete love for God is what enables the believer to imitate and become more Christ-like. The love of God fully alive and active in the believer transforms the believer from the very core of his being, changing both the inner and outer person in a way that the believer begins to

manifest Christ-likeness more regularly, more consistently, and more habitually (Headley Kindle 120). Love then is the essential inner character of holiness, and holiness cannot exist apart from love. Wesley believed and was committed to “the centrality of love” because he believed it was scriptural, and his devotion to holiness was because of his firm belief that the Bible characterized holiness and perfection as love (Wynkoop Kindle Loc 401-404). How did Wesley translate this theology to his believers? What kind of strategies did he employ to give his believers the opportunity to grow and experience all he taught? What were some of the disciplines that he encouraged to help them on this spiritual formation journey to become spiritually mature?

To answer these questions, it is important to look at the structure of Wesley’s ministry. John Wesley was guided by George Whitfield early on in his ministry after the established churches closed their doors to him. It was George Whitefield who introduced John Wesley to field preaching and mass evangelism. The difference in the two ministers is what they did with their believers after the initial proclamation of the Word. While George Whitfield focused more on his preaching, leaving the follow-up to the people, Wesley left nothing to chance but was meticulous in the management of his believers. He was very concerned with regard to the spiritual formation of his believers and made a great effort to provide resources and structure for their spiritual growth and discipleship. Methodist historian Adam Clarke, summarizing the difference between Whitfield’s and Wesley’s ministry, quotes Whitfield, who is supposed to have once said, “My Brother Wesley acted wisely—the souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class, and thus preserved the fruits of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand” (Henderson Kindle 20). From very early on, Wesley, organized believers into

societies, class meetings, and band meetings. The societies were similar to a local church congregation and numbered approximately fifty people. The primary focus of the society gathering was to preach, teach, and instruct for the purpose of life change. It was the educational channel by which the tenets of Methodism were presented to the target population, mainly by circuit riders including Wesley himself (Henderson, Kindle 72). Second, every member of a society was also grouped into classes, which consisted of ten to twelve people and functioned like a modern-day small group. It was an extremely useful model for bible study and discipleship and was well structured by Wesley (Henderson Kindle 1). The class meeting was pivotal to the movement and formed the backbone of the Methodist reformation for the next century. The “class meeting” turned out to be the primary means of bringing millions of England’s most desperate people into the liberating discipline of the Christian faith (Henderson Kindle 18). The third kind of group that gathered were called “Bands,” which Wesley adopted from the Moravians, and they usually comprised of approximately four to six members. These gatherings were more intentional in their discipleship and spiritual formation. They were same-sex gatherings with strong accountability for the lives and spiritual growth of their members. The Band gatherings were the ideal environment for intimate interaction. Wesley guided the various elements of these gatherings so as to facilitate the outcome in terms of spiritual growth (Henderson Kindle 55-56).

The Disciplines of Spiritual Formation Practiced by John Wesley and the Methodists

Wesley was a very spiritually disciplined person. Adam Hamilton, in his book *Revival: Faith as John Wesley Lived It*, states that Wesley rose every morning at four or

five am for private prayer, fasted twice a week, read and meditated upon scripture daily, actively pursued acts of compassion, sought to achieve a life of simplicity, met often with others in his Holy Club to study the scriptures, and attended public worship and received the Eucharist weekly. He was a man who functioned according to predetermined rules and did not neglect the spiritual disciplines that formed him (44).

As a minister, Wesley called these disciplines “Means of Grace.” Wesley’s teaching on this subject developed from the belief that just because God’s grace is free does not mean that one should lie idle but instead should engage in the means of grace. The means of grace are the ways God works invisibly in disciples, quickening, strengthening, forming, and confirming faith so that God’s grace works in and through His children. These elements include prayer, fasting, bible reading, devotional and catechetical readings, receiving the Eucharist, and more specifically Methodist practices like class meetings, love feasts, covenantal renewal practices, and special rules for holy living. This study will briefly look at prayer, study and meditation on scripture, accountability, and Wesley’s rules for living.

Prayer. Wesley himself was a man of prayer, and it flowed over to the movement he led. He exhorted his believers to pray as individuals, as families, in groups and corporately. Wesley once called prayer the grand means of drawing nearer to God. In a correspondence with a believer, Wesley encouraged the believer to set aside a time every day to pray and read the scriptures. He writes, “it is for your life; there is no other way. Do justice to your own soul: give it time to grow and means to grow” (Maddox 213). Wesley’s collection of prayers for individuals and families are a testament to a vibrant and intimate prayer life.

The Study and Meditation on Scripture. Regular personal study of scripture was one of the most precious spiritual disciplines that Wesley practiced. Wesley specifically challenged his believers to read two portions of scripture daily, one from the Old Testament and the other from the New, every morning and evening. He also encouraged his believers to spend much time in this discipline and to prayerfully meditate on the scripture they read. In a letter written to one of his disciples, Wesley writes,

All the knowledge you want is comprised in one book—the Bible. When you understand this, you will know enough. I advise you, therefore, to begin every day (before or after private prayer) with reading a portion more or less of the Old or New Testament, or of both if you have time, together with the Notes, which may lead you by the hand into suitable meditation. After breakfast, you may read (in order) the volumes of Sermons (and the other practical books which we have published) more or less at a time (as other business permits) with meditation and prayer. Young, Milton, and the Moral and Sacred Poems you may read chiefly in the afternoons. Whatever you write, you should write in the forenoons. Take care never to read or write too long at a time. That is not conducive either to bodily or spiritual health. (*The Essential Works of John Wesley* 1247)

Wesley also freely used a large number of Puritan devotionals, catechetical readings, that he made available to his believers for circulation. He was also a prolific writer and published much of his own material for the spiritual development of his believers.

Accountability. Wesley believed in accountability. He often quoted the maxim “The soul and body make a [human]; but spirit and discipline make a Christian” (Maddox 211).

One of the key ways accountability was practiced was through the band meetings. The band meetings were purely voluntary, though Wesley promoted them extensively as his favorite group. The idea for the band meetings came from his time with the Moravians who conducted band meetings. The meetings were closed meetings, as opposed to the class meetings. These band meetings were very intimate in terms of what the participants shared, and they held each other accountable for their motives, feeling, and actions. As mentioned before, Wesley guided the various elements of these gatherings so as to facilitate outcomes in terms of spiritual growth. The environment of these meetings facilitated honesty and openness with the purpose being to improve the attitudes, emotions, feelings, thoughts, and intentions of the members (Henderson Kindle 100).

Rules for Living. Wesley was a man who lived according to certain rules. As mentioned before, he prayed daily, read the scriptures daily, fasted twice a week, strived to live a life of simplicity, and engaged in acts of compassion (Hamilton 45). This ethos flowed into his ministry. There were three rules that he and all his believers were governed by. The three-fold injunction of the General Rules were: 1. Avoid all known sin, 2. Do as much good as one can, and 3. Attend all the ordinances of God (Maddox 211). Wesley also had rules for the Societies, the Classes and the Bands,

Near the end of his life, Wesley could claim he “knew” all of the 30,000 people in his societies by name and what was the condition of their spiritual life. He did have available to him the exact and multiple record of all the transactions of the societies, and he made it his business to know the state of every facet of the system. The record-keeping process was an essential ingredient to the proper

functioning of the group system, and Wesley kept it well-oiled (Henderson Kindle 132).

Modern Literature on Spiritual Formation to Strengthen Christian Maturity

A scroll through most libraries will reveal a lot of literature on spiritual formation, spiritual disciplines, and Christian maturity. Richard Foster recently commented, “When I first began writing about spiritual formation, the soul hunger in people was obvious and the resources meager. Since then, a publishing avalanche has occurred on the subject-- some helpful, some less than helpful” (*The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible xv*). Yet the lack of Christian maturity is one of the pressing problems of the modern church.

Gordon Smith, quoting a George Barna research, shows that almost nine out of ten senior pastors of Protestant churches asserted that spiritual immaturity is one of the most serious problems facing the Church (Smith Kindle 15).

The researcher was selective in his research of modern literature and focused on literature specific to the study. The following modern literature were particularly useful for the study: Richard J. Foster’s *Streams of Living Water*, Dallas Willard’s *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Donald S. Whitney’s *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Gordon T. Smith’s *Called to Be Saints*, M. Robert Mulholland Jr.’s *Shaped by The Word*, N.T. Wright’s *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, Kenneth Boa’s *Conformed to His Image*, and James C. Wilhoit’s *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered* These all provided great insight into the key themes of this study.

The theme of Christian maturity has been discussed in great detail in the preceding pages. For the purpose of this study, Christian maturity has been defined as a life-long development process of becoming more and more Christ-like through union

with Him by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It must be the aim of every believer, and it is God's master plan and purpose for His children. It is a life-long journey, and the believer will never arrive while on this earth; the journey is not complete until the day of resurrection, when the Lord brings the believer into complete conformity with himself (Boa Kindle Loc 282-286). Jesus is the model. When one considers how He lived in the flesh, one then must begin an "intentional *imitatio Christi*," imitation of Christ, by catching the spirit and power in which He lived and by learning to walk "in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21). (Foster Kindle 3). Believers must align their lives with Christ's life, live as He did, do what He did, serve as He did, and walk the path that He walked. To live as Christ lived is to live as He did all his life. (*The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* Kindle 5). To possess the fruit of a life in Christ, one must live a life like Christ (Murray 5). The call to perfection is the invitation to be that which one was created to be (Smith 19). Christians are called to be genuine, image-bearing, God-reflecting human beings (Wright 247). However, this is not an instantaneous experience, but a lifelong process of growth into the image of Christ, a process that is called spiritual formation (Mullholland Jr. 25).

Christian maturity does not happen automatically and, in fact, is a slow and tedious process of spiritual formation. Anyone who desires to grow in their spiritual life and enter into a deeper walk with the Lord will sense the need for discipline, direction, and formation (Nouwen Kindle Loc 211-212). However, due to the fact that today is an instant gratification, demand/supply world, spiritual formation can seem tedious and sometimes frustrating (Mulholland Jr. 25). Therefore, no matter how enthusiastic people may be of spiritual formation, they soon realize that there is no shortcut to this formation.

Like a marathon, for example, after the initial burst, the launching process is much easier than the rest of the journey (Boa Kindle Loc 1363-1364). One of the key mistakes Christians make is assuming that if they simply pray more, read the scriptures more, fast more, and serve more, they will become better Christians. However, there is truly only one way to becoming Christ-like; it is to abide in Him and let Him form us. Spiritual formation is the “cultivation” of this union with Christ, and without this union, spiritual formation will be a frustrating, demoralizing, and discouraging effort.

Spiritual formation is not devoid of life’s day-to-day circumstances. In fact, it is through life’s experiences that one is spiritually formed in Christ. One of the greatest challenges faced these days in serving as Christian leaders in this country is the temptation to compartmentalize spirituality from the secular. Therefore, there must be a holistic mindset about spiritual formation, where Christ is central to every component of life (Boa Kindle Loc 3765-3767). Boa comments further on this issue, “This biblical alternative to a compartmentalization mentality focuses on the implications of Christ’s lordship in such a way that even the most mundane components of life can become expressions of the life of Christ in us” (Boa Kindle Loc 3765-3767). Spiritual formation is futile if the disciplines of spiritual formation are practiced in isolation; they must permeate through every facet of life. Spiritual formation, while quickened and strengthened by the practice of spiritual disciplines, happens through the struggles of the daily life of the Christian believer. God uses the circumstances of life, especially the trials of life, to work to the benefit of all who love Him and are called to His purposes (Romans 8:28).

It was a common saying among the Christians of the primitive church, “The soul and the body make a man; the spirit and discipline make a Christian;” the implication

being that no one could be a real Christian without the practice of Christian discipline (Willard Kindle 16-17).

The spiritual disciplines are those activities that help form Christians spiritually. They are practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Whitney 4). They are activities undertaken to bring believers into submission and effective co-operation with Christ and His Kingdom (Willard Kindle 156). As discussed in the preceding pages, John Wesley called these disciplines “means of grace,” i.e. the way God works invisibly in disciples, quickening, strengthening, forming, and confirming faith so that God's grace works in and through His children. Kenneth Boa explains the spiritual disciplines as

The product of a synergy between divine and human initiative, and they serve us as means of grace insofar as they bring our personalities under the lordship of Christ and the control of the Spirit. By practicing them, we place our minds, temperaments, and bodies before God and seek the grace of his transformation. (Boa Kindle Loc1375-1377)

There are many disciplines that have been developed over the years, however, for this study, the Spiritual Formation Program included the practice of prayer, study of scripture using the historical discipline of *lectio divina*, weekly fasting, living according to a personal rule of life, and opening up to a peer-to-peer accountability relationship. Of all spiritual disciplines, the discipline of prayer is the most common, and yet one of absolute importance because it provides perpetual communion with the Father (Foster 33). Prayer is also a discipline that is integrated with other disciplines. When one reads and studies the scriptures, it is done prayerfully. When one practices solitude, it will

always be in a spirit of prayer. If the practice of the spiritual disciplines is based on the activities that the great men and women of the Bible practiced, then prayer is the one discipline that virtually all of them practiced. All who have walked with God in history have had strong prayer lives (Foster 34). One of the most striking qualities of Jesus' relationship with the Father is intimacy. While Jesus walked this earth, it was clear that there was complete synergy between Him and the Father, and like a recurring pattern in a quilt prayer threads its way through Jesus' life (Foster 4). Prayer is communion with God, and from a Biblical point of view it is not a drudgery but an opportunity, a God-given privilege to draw near to God (Boa Kindle Loc 1440-1444). The spiritual formation journey must begin by asking Jesus how to pray, for without prayer, there is no journey.

The spiritual discipline of fasting refers to abstaining from food for spiritual purposes (Foster 48), and in almost every fasting recorded in the scriptures, prayer accompanied fasting. Few disciplines go so radically against the flesh and the mainstream culture of consumerism as fasting (Whitney 192); however, with the right attitude and motive, fasting clears out the haze and opens one up to the spiritual world in a way that praying alone cannot do (Calhoun 219). From a Biblical point of view, fasting also demonstrates a seriousness about the believer's concerns, actions, and prayers. As mentioned before, in the scriptures, fasting is often coupled with other disciplines, such as prayer. Fasting for fasting's sake is futile. Fasting allows one to learn to feast upon God (Foster 55).

The reading, study, meditation, and internalization of the scriptures is absolutely vital for spiritual formation. Throughout Biblical history, the Word has played a pivotal role in the shaping of personal and corporate spirituality. Modern literature testifies to the

absolute importance of scripture. Donald Whitney writes, “no Spiritual Discipline is more important than the intake of God’s Word. Nothing can substitute for it. There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture” (22). N. T. Wright states, “the practice of reading scripture, studying scripture, acting scripture, singing scripture—generally soaking oneself in scripture as an individual and a community—has been seen from the earliest days of Christianity as central to the formation of Christian character” (261). For the purpose of this study, the spiritual discipline of reading the scriptures was based upon the old discipline of *lectio divina*, a Latin term which means divine (*divina*) reading (*lectio*). *Lectio divina* is a historical spiritual discipline that comes from the Benedictine tradition. It encompasses reading the scripture with reverence and openness as if God is going to converse with the reader in the present (Nouwen Kindle loc 244). Henry Nouwen states that, to read the Bible in this way means, therefore, to read “on my knees,” reverently, attentively, and with the deep faith that God has a word for this unique situation. (Kindle Loc 270).

The benefit of reading in this manner is that it combines three disciplines into one. *Lectio divina* combines prayer, meditation, and scripture reading into one powerful discipline. Kenneth Boa presents these five steps in reading the scriptures in this manner:

1. Select a very short text and ingest it by reading it several times.
2. Take a few minutes to reflect on the words and phrases in the text you have read.
3. Ponder the passage by asking questions and using your imagination.
4. Having internalized the passage, offer it back to God in the form of personalized prayer.

5. Spend some time contemplating on what was read and what you feel God is telling you. Enjoy being in God's presence. (Boa Kindle Loc 1730-1747)

The fourth discipline in this study was the discipline of living according to a Personal Rule of Life. The first example of a Rule of Life came from the monastic community living in Egypt called the Desert Fathers. The rule of St. Benedict is one of the most famous rules and was crafted for him and his followers around A.D. 540 (Macchia 16). The word "rule" is derived from the Latin word *regula*, meaning "rule, pattern, model, example." A Rule of life has to do with a pattern of disciplines that is practiced by an individual person, a small group of disciples, or even a community (e.g., the Rule of St. Benedict) (Boa, Kindle Loc 8484-8509). A simple personal rule of life is one of the easiest and yet most meaningful disciplines for life. Stephen A. Macchia in his book *Crafting a Rule of Life: An Invitation to the Well-Ordered Way*, defines a personal rule of life as one which is a holistic description of the Spirit-empowered rhythms and relationships that create, redeem, sustain, and transform the life God invites one to humbly fulfill for Christ's glory (14). Simply put, it is a commitment to live life in a particular way that honors God, honors mortal limits, prioritizes what matters in life according to the Spirit's leading, and helps keep discipline and focus throughout life. It must be crafted prayerfully and carefully (Boa Kindle Loc 4754-4757). A holistic personal rule of life must cover all facets of life, i.e. spiritual, mental, physical, emotional and social.

The fifth discipline practiced in this study was peer-to-peer accountability. There is an increasing awareness that isolation is not healthy for spiritual growth, and the need for true community is essential for Christian leaders, as well as Christian communities

(Boa Kindle Loc 8342). People are not made to be self-reliant or independent but are created for community. For the purpose of this study, peer-to-peer accountability was encouraged among the participants to facilitate open and honest discussion. Spiritual companionship is essential for spiritual formation; having relationships that foster loving accountability and are built on trust is essential. An accountability partner should be able to ask, “How is it with your soul?” without the other feeling uncomfortable (Foster 95). Accountability partners help each other move forward in their spiritual formation journey. They “grow” together as they “go” together. True, honest, loving, and trustworthy accountability can nurture spiritual growth, provide refreshing soul care, and be a life-changing vehicle of God’s grace. Accountability partners share each other’s struggles and celebrate each other’s joys to foster an environment of encouragement and honest confessions. Together, they face the temptations and difficulties of life. Adele A. Calhoun says that accountability partners share the last ten percent of themselves with each other. They let their secrets out, and together they focus on living holy and responsible lives, fueled by desire for God (123).

Research Design Literature

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a selected group of house church leaders who participated in the Spiritual Formation Program. This study was a mixed-method design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research, utilizing both their strengths. Creswell, in his book “Research Design,” states that there is more insight to be gained from a mixed-method design of quantitative and qualitative research as opposed to either form by itself (Creswell 216). At the heart of a multi-methods approach is the assumption that

“different procedures are employed to ask different questions and to solve different problems” (Sensing Kindle Loc 1688-1689).

This study employed an intervention to determine the level of change in Christian maturity in the house church leader through a spiritual formation program consisting of five spiritual disciplines. Ministry interventions are designed to address particular problems for specific contexts (Sensing Kindle Loc 1678). The interventionist method “is a type of action research where the researcher becomes a co-participant with the community in the process of gathering and interpreting data to enable new and transformative modes of action” (Sensing, 63). Quantitative data was gathered by a pre-test questionnaire to determine the current level of Christian maturity at the start of the study and a post-test questionnaire to determine the level of change in Christian maturity at the end of the study. The quantitative data was analyzed statistically using Descriptive Analysis and a t-test model (Creswell p183). The quantitative data analysis provided easy to measure and understand results in relation to the level of change in Christian maturity before and after the test.

For the gathering of qualitative data, a ten-member focus group was utilized. This qualitative tool was necessary because whereas “surveys can provide answers to the questions What? Where? When? And How? qualitative data provides data to the important question of ‘Why?’ Qualitative researches are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam 5). The Focus Group was an open-ended forum that allowed participants to provide information and ideas and share feelings about the “lived” experience of the intervention. This research tool gathers more subtle information

and varied data that quantitative data cannot provide, because “the group responds to a series of questions that allows the researcher to quickly gather from several points of view” (Sensing, 120). Quoting Sharan B. Merriam, Sensing writes,

Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth. (Sensing Loc 1629-1632)

The transcripts of the Focus Group were analyzed using Documentary Analysis as suggested in Sensing. A thematic approach was adopted to analyze the data as the purpose of the research was to investigate the level of change in Christian maturity through a spiritual formation program. Thus, Christian maturity and spiritual formation were common themes that influenced the data analysis of the questionnaires. The main aim of gathering research from the Focus Group was to ascertain the reasons why the participants of the Test Group responded at a higher rate compared to the Control Group. Furthermore, the Focus Group data also provided the information to determine which elements of the Spiritual Formation Program, if any, were more influential than others. The Focus Group data was read and analyzed reflexively as the researcher himself is a major contributor to the Sri Lankan house church initiative and was also a part of the intervention process as lecturer. In Research Gate’s writing on qualitative data analysis, Jennifer Mason is quoted as saying that reflexive reading “will locate you as part of the data you have generated, and will seek to explore your role and perspective in the process

of generation and interpretation of data” (*Three approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis* Chapter 2 p 3).

Summary of Literature

This literature review began with exploring the Biblical Foundation for Christian maturity in the Old Testament and New Testament. The review further explored the disciplines of the Spiritual Formation Program of this study in scripture. The Biblical Foundations review provided clear evidence that Christian maturity is a theme that runs across the entire scriptures, that scriptures assume that a Christian is one who grows in maturity and develops Christ-like character, and that it is God’s design and purpose to conform believers into the image of His Son. The review of scriptures also revealed that Christian maturity does not happen automatically but by abiding in Christ, yielding to the Holy Spirit, and practicing disciplines that help spiritual formation.

The theological foundations that naturally flowed out of the review of the scriptures were:

1. Christian Maturity is not possible without union in Christ.
2. Spiritual Formation is a life-long journey that involves the practice of spiritual disciplines to strengthen Christian maturity
3. The goal of Christian Maturity is finding completion in Jesus Christ.

A brief study of the historical catechesis provided rich insight into how the early church went about developing Christian maturity in new believers through an intentional and systematic instruction model in the catechesis and how its successful implementation benefitted the church greatly, while its neglect was to the church’s detriment. The study of John Wesley’s theology on Christian perfection and sanctification provided rich

insight into the theology of one of the great leaders of modern church history. Wesley's strategic follow up of his believers through the Societies, the Class meetings, and the Band discipleship groups ushered in a revival movement that is still reaping dividends. The research of modern literature on the themes of Christian maturity, spiritual formation, and the practice of spiritual disciplines provided more valuable information on how spiritual formation with the purpose of developing Christian maturity in Christians has developed and evolved over the years. Modern trends and new learnings provided fresh insight to this study. Finally, the literature that influenced the research design of this study was explored, and chapter three will cover the research methodology in greater detail.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter will provide the reader an in-depth look at the research methodology of the project. The reader will be able to grasp how the project was designed in order to gather the necessary information to provide the answers that the research questions presented and thereby successfully complete the project. This chapter begins with a summary of the nature and purpose of the project. Second, the research questions will be presented with an explanation on how the researcher will seek to answer these questions. The contents of this chapter will next detail the context of the research, the manner in which the potential participants were selected, and the data collection methods the researcher used to gather the necessary data. Finally, the reliability and validity of the project design will be justified at the conclusion of this chapter.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

Christian maturity is the life-long process of a Christian becoming more and more like Jesus. This maturity process does not happen automatically but through a Holy Spirit-infused intentional, systematic, and disciplined spiritual formation. A Spiritual formation program is an intentional and systematic practice of certain disciplines with the goal of developing Christian maturity. The house church planting movement in Sri Lanka has gained recent popularity due to its attractive church growth figures. However, the researcher is concerned that there is no intentional and systematic effort to build Christian maturity in the most critical human resource component of the movement – the house church leader. The danger lies in the fact that weak Christian maturity in house church

leaders will weaken and compromise the movement. A conscious effort to strengthen Christian maturity in the house church leaders of the movement will enable them to live and serve in a Christ-like manner and thus will strengthen the entire house church movement itself. The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a selected group of house church leaders who participated in the spiritual formation program. For the purpose of this study, these spiritual formation practices included a consistent prayer life, fasting, the study and meditation of scripture, living according to a personal rule of life, and weekly peer-to-peer accountability.

Research Questions

RQ #1. What is the current level of Christian maturity among the house church leaders selected for this research?

The first research question sought to find out what the current level of Christian maturity was among the participants prior to the study. This is an important factor to the study. The participants were house church leaders from three different churches and, while none of them had undergone an intentional and systematic training in spiritual formation prior to this, it was important to determine the current level of maturity among the selected house church leaders in order to establish a baseline for evaluating and measuring the research program. Questionnaire #1 (Appendix E) was used to provide answers to research question one. The participants were equally divided into a control group and a test group prior to the intervention program. The questionnaire listed twenty statements and participants from both groups were required to indicate their answer on a scale of 1 to 5.

RQ #2. What is the level of change in Christian maturity among the House Church Leaders after undertaking the study?

The second research question sought to measure the level of change in Christian maturity among the participants of both the Control and Test Groups after the four-week Spiritual Formation Program. Questionnaire #2 was identical to questionnaire #1, providing the same questions with the opportunity to answer each of those questions on the same scale of 1 to 5. The feedback of the participants of the Test Group in particular provided the critical data to gauge the level of change in Christian maturity over the four-week period. The post-test data received from the Test Group also gave the researcher the opportunity to evaluate the data received from the Control Group after the four-week period. This in turn gave the researcher the required data to evaluate and measure the impact of the four-week Spiritual Formation Program.

RQ #3. What were the various elements of the Spiritual Formation Program that influenced and strengthened Christian maturity in the house church leaders?

The third research question sought to determine the impact of the various elements of the Spiritual Formation Program in order to evaluate and determine how and which of the spiritual formation elements were most effective. The four-week Spiritual Formation Program included the consistent practice of praying for one hour a day (thirty minutes in the morning and thirty minutes in the night), praying for five minutes at the beginning of every hour, fasting once a week, the study and meditation of scripture according to the ancient *lectio divina* practice, living according to a seven-point personal rule of life, and having a one-hour weekly peer-to-peer accountability meeting.

A ten-member focus group was created to assess research question #3 as well as to elaborate on the quantitative data gleaned from research questions #1 and #2. Their discussions and responses helped determine the effectiveness of each element of the

Spiritual Formation Program, which elements were particularly effective in contributing to the change in the level of Christian maturity, and the impact the combined elements had on the participants.

Ministry Context for Observing the Phenomenon

Sri Lanka belongs to the Asian continent, a continent with one of the fastest growing church movements in recent history. The House Church Planting model has contributed to much of the growth of the church in Asia, whether it be in China, India, Korea, Pakistan, and now Sri Lanka. The Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka state that Sri Lanka is home to 20.77 million people of which 74.8% are Sinhalese; 11.1% are Tamils, and Muslims, Burghers, and other ethnicities make up the rest of the population. Buddhism is the predominant religion at 70.2% of the population. Another 12.6% of the population are Hindus, and 9.6% are Muslim. Although 7.6% of the population is Catholic, it is estimated that evangelical Christians make up just 1.5% to 2% of this percentage. (Lanka).

The Ministry intervention was conducted at the Matugama House Church Leaders Training Centre, Kalutara District, Western Province, Sri Lanka. The context of the study were three large 500+ member congregation Assembly of God churches in the Western and Southern provinces of Sri Lanka. The Assembly of God Puwakpitiya, Peoples Church Matugama, and Assembly of God Galle are three established churches with a church building and a weekly gathering of believers on Sundays. However, the majority of their congregations do not gather on Sundays in their local church buildings but in house churches across the three districts. It is for this reason that each of these churches are the largest churches in their relative districts. All three churches have planted over

one hundred house churches each, and together have planted almost five hundred house churches in the last ten years. Though these churches are situated in different districts and locations, all three churches minister in very similar environments, which was important to this study. For example, all three churches are located in areas where Buddhism is the majority religion, and the Christian population is under 2%. Resistance to the gospel is a commonality to the churches. The three churches have faced persecution in many forms. In fact, 99% of the three church congregations are first generation Christians from Buddhist and Hindu backgrounds. The church planting vision of the three churches is similar: to reach every village, every family, and every person in their district with the gospel of Jesus Christ by planting a house church in every village. All three churches invest over 50% of their resources in leadership training and development.

Participants Sampled About the Phenomenon

Criteria for Selection

A group of one hundred participants were selected for this study, and the criteria for their selection was that they were all house church leaders from the churches of Assembly of God Puwakpitiya, Assembly of God Matugama, or Assembly of God Galle. The participants were all first-generation Christians from Buddhist and Hindu backgrounds who were Christians for a minimum of three years, baptized, and serving as House Church leaders for a minimum period of one year. They all served in ministry contexts that were resistant to the proclamation and ministry of the gospel. The participants were also selected for their demonstrated commitment to their faith and ministry. In line with Sensing's Naturalistic Inquiry, the researcher sought to select

people who represented a broad range of perspectives by increasing inclusivity (Sensing, Tim. Kindle Loc 2289-2292).

Description of Participants

All participants were from Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups and included both men and women. The participants were between the ages of 21 and 45 years of age. They were all from Buddhist and Hindu religious backgrounds, meaning that these leaders did not just change church or denomination, they were genuine converts to Christianity. The participants came from various educational backgrounds, and the level of education varied greatly. In order to facilitate maximum variation, the researcher sought to maintain general balance in the selection process. In general, the participants had equal representation from all three churches, had a healthy balance of Sinhalese and Tamil, and represented leaders in their twenties, thirties, and forties.

Ethical Consideration

Each participant was selected with their senior pastor's consent (Appendix A), was briefed about the nature of the study, and was invited to be a part of the study voluntarily. The participants were required to sign consent forms detailing the data collection process and the procedure regarding confidentiality (Appendix B). They were also required to sign a confidentiality agreement (Appendix C). The ten participants that were selected and invited to function as a focus group completed consent forms as well (Appendix D). The third-party facilitator was also required to sign a confidentiality agreement (Appendix C). In order to maintain anonymity throughout the study, each participant from both Control and Test Groups was only identified by a number (CG participant 1, TG participant 1). For the ten-member Focus Group, each participant was

also identified by a number (FG participant 1, FG participant 2). The data that was collected and processed was stored on an encrypted computer and was assigned for deletion within twelve months after the test.

Procedure for Collecting Evidence from Participants

This study was a mixed-methods intervention model to determine the level of change in Christian maturity in the participants through the intervention of a spiritual formation program. The selected one hundred participants were equally divided into a control group and test group of fifty each. Once again, the participants were briefed about the nature of the study and the process regarding confidentiality. First, each of the participants from both Control and Test Groups were required to fill out a pre-intervention questionnaire (questionnaire #1: Appendix E) to investigate the current level of Christian maturity among the participants. This questionnaire served as a marker to evaluate and study the rest of the findings of the research. Second, the Test Group participated in a two-hour seminar on Christian maturity and spiritual formation. The participants were informed of the value of spiritual formation to strengthen Christian maturity and were introduced to the Spiritual Formation Program that they were going to practice for the four-week period (seminar lecture outline: Appendix F). Third, at the end of the seminar, the participants were instructed to write out a simple seven-point personal rule of life they were going to commit to for the four-week study period (Appendix G). The participants were encouraged to keep the personal rule of life as simple as possible with the following guideline:

- Rule 1 – 3 must concern your personal life.
- Rule 4 must concern your marriage/family.

- Rule 5 must concern your church and ministry.
- Rule 6 must concern your work place.
- Rule 7 must concern your relationship with society.

Finally, the Test Group was divided into pairs to function as accountability groups. These accountability partners would speak to each other once a week for a minimum of thirty minutes to a maximum of sixty minutes and discuss their past week, using a given format as a guideline (Appendix H).

At the end of the four-week study, all one hundred participants were required to fill out a post-intervention questionnaire (Appendix E) to determine the level of change in Christian maturity of the participants after the test period. Questionnaire #2 was identical to questionnaire #1. The Control Group participant questionnaires and the Test Group participant questionnaires were collected separately. Following the collection of all data from the post-intervention questionnaire, the researcher thanked the participants for their commitment and closed in prayer.

For the purpose of gathering qualitative data, ten participants from the Test Group were randomly selected and invited to join a Focus Group. Though the participants were randomly selected, each participant was invited for this research and joined the group voluntarily. An experienced third-party candidate was recruited to facilitate the discussion with the Focus Group. On a prior date, as per Sensing's advice, the third-party facilitator was briefed on the background and purpose of the study, relevant guideline information about the interview schedule, and ethical considerations (Sensing Kindle Loc 2725).

The Focus Group gathered for a little over one-hour meeting (62:05). The moderator was given an outline of questions to ask each of the Focus Group members and was also given permission to probe responses to the questions in order to clarify and receive greater information (Appendix I). The type of interview questions that were asked were semi-structured qualitative questions. This structure was most effective as it kept the interview focused on the main themes and issues. The questions served to pave a way for the interview to proceed, but the interviewer was free to pursue matters at his discretion. However, the probing was narrowed by a preset protocol that correlated with the project's problem and purpose statements (Sensing Kindle Loc 2701-2704). The purpose was to probe more deeply the impact the Spiritual Formation Program had on the participants and the reasons for the increase in the levels of Christian maturity in the test group. Furthermore, the Focus Group data also provided valuable insight into the various elements of the Spiritual Formation Program and how each of them influenced the strengthening of Christian maturity in the participants.

Procedure for Analyzing the Evidence Collected

This research project utilized both quantitative and qualitative research through two questionnaires and focus group audio recording transcripts. The pre-test and post-test questionnaires were designed to generate quantitative data. Questionnaire #1 was utilized to determine the level of Christian maturity at the start of the Spiritual Formation Program. This questionnaire was filled by both Control and Test Groups and analyzed together. At the end of the four-week Spiritual Formation Program, questionnaire #2, which was identical to questionnaire #1, was utilized to determine the level of change in Christian maturity in the participants after the intervention period. The second

questionnaire was presented to both Control and Test Groups but were analyzed separately. Each of the twenty questions on the questionnaires had the option of the participants marking their answer on a scale of 1 - 5. The two questionnaires were identical and asked the same twenty questions. The quantitative data was analyzed statistically using Descriptive Analysis and a T-Test model (Creswell p183). T-tests were used to determine the statistical difference or similarity between the individual groups. In order to compare whether the Control Group participants and the Test Group participants were statistically similar to each other, an unpaired t-test was used. In order to test whether the pre-test and post-test responses of the Control Group and the pre-test and post-test responses of the Test Group were statistically different paired t-tests were used. The quantitative data analysis provided easily measurable and understandable results in relation to the level of change in Christian maturity before and after the test.

The next step was to analyze and interpret the Focus Group's data to ascertain the reason for the positive changes in the levels of Christian maturity in the Test Group and how the various elements of the Spiritual Formation Program contributed to the change in the maturity levels in the participants. The transcripts of the Focus Group were analyzed using Documentary Analysis, as suggested in Sensing. The first step taken to analyze the data was to read through all the data many times over a seven-day period. Second, the researcher analyzed the data looking for common themes. A thematic approach was adopted to analyze the data as the purpose of the research was to investigate the level of change in Christian maturity through a spiritual formation program. Christian maturity and spiritual formation were common themes that influenced the data analysis of the questionnaires. The main aim of gathering research from the Focus Group was to

ascertain the reasons why the participants of the Test Group responded at a higher rate compared to the Control Group. Furthermore, the Focus Group data also provided the information to determine which elements of the Spiritual Formation Program, if any, were more influential elements than others. The Focus Group data was read and analyzed reflexively as the researcher himself is a major contributor to the Sri Lankan house church initiative and was also part of the intervention process as lecturer. In Research Gate's writing on qualitative data analysis, Jennifer Mason is quoted as saying that reflexive reading "will locate you as part of the data you have generated, and will seek to explore your role and perspective in the process of generation and interpretation of data" (*Three approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis* 2- 3).

Reliability & Validity of Project Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a selected group of house church leaders who participated in the Spiritual Formation Program. Though this study was limited to house church leaders in the Western and Southern provinces of Sri Lanka, the results can be generalized to house church leaders in the remaining provinces of the country, in different contexts, and across denominations. The dynamics of a Spiritual Formation Program is applicable to all denominations and contexts. Christian maturity is the goal of all believers across all denominations, and this study is valuable to anyone and everyone who wants to grow in Christian maturity.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

The following chapter provides an in-depth look at the evidence collected during the research phase of this study. First, this chapter provides an overview of the participants that were involved in this study. Second, this chapter explores the evidence collected methodically as per the research questions of this study. Finally, this chapter concludes with four major findings. The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a selected group of house church leaders who participated in a spiritual formation program. For the purpose of this study, these spiritual formation practices included the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, the study and meditation of scripture, living according to a personal rule of life, and weekly peer-to-peer accountability.

Participants

The one hundred participants selected for this study were from Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups and included both men and women. The participants were between the ages of 21 and 45. They were all from Buddhist and Hindu religious backgrounds, had converted to Christianity, and were serving as house church leaders for a minimum of one year. The participants came from various educational backgrounds and the level of education varied greatly, however, educational background was not a prerequisite. The participants were from Assembly of God Puwakpitiya, Peoples Church Assembly of God Matugama, and Assembly of God Galle. These one hundred participants were people

with proven ministries serving as house church leaders in environments where Christianity is an extreme minority.

The participants were divided into two groups. One group of fifty participants functioned as a control group for the study, while the second group of fifty participants functioned as a test group for the study. The Test Group was exposed to the spiritual formation intervention, while the Control Group was unaware of such a program. This enabled uncompromised information gathering and data collection for the study. The following tables provides greater detail about the participants.

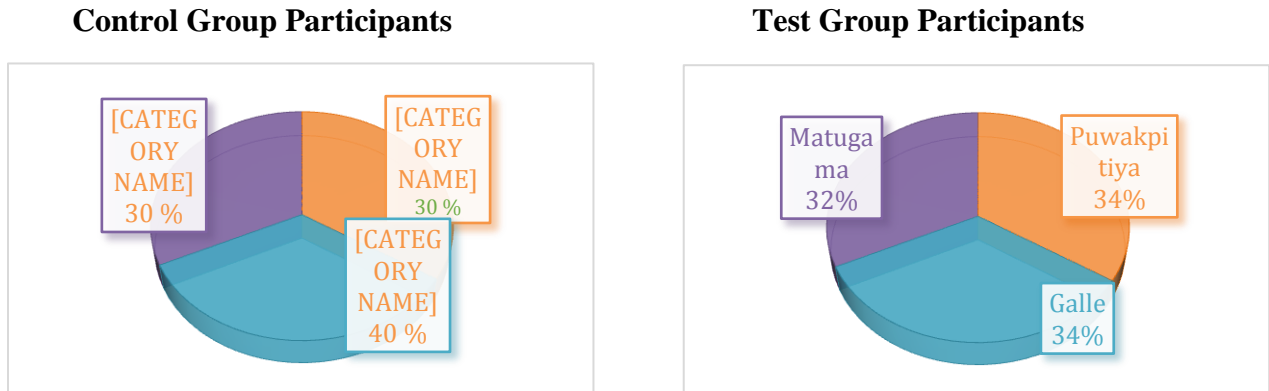
Table 4.1. Control Group Participant Profiles

AGE	21-30 years	31 – 40 years	Above 40 +	Mean / Ave	Median
	19	26	5	31.7	34
ETHNICITY & GENDER	Sinhalese Men	Sinhalese Women	Tamil Men	Tamil Women	
	12	18	12	8	
RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND	Buddhist	Hindu			
	30	20			
EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	No GCE Ordinary Level	GCE Ordinary Level	GCE Advanced Level	Graduate Level	Post Graduate Level
	6	22	15	5	2

Table 4.2. Test Group Participant Profiles

AGE	21-30 years	31 – 40 years	Above 40 +	Mean / Ave	Median
	14	20	16	33.2	36
ETHNICITY & GENDER	Sinhalese Men	Sinhalese Women	Tamil Men	Tamil Women	
	12	18	12	8	
RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND	Buddhist	Hindu			
	30	20			
EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	No GCE Ordinary Level	GCE Ordinary Level	GCE Advanced Level	Graduate Level	Post Graduate Level
	4	18	16	8	4

Chart 4.1. Test Group & Control Group Participants



Research Question #1: Description of Evidence

What is the current level of Christian maturity among the house church leaders selected for this research?

Research Question #1 was addressed through a quantitative questionnaire (questionnaire #1: Appendix E) to determine the current level of Christian maturity prior to exposing the Test Group participants to the Spiritual Formation Program. The questionnaire was completed by all one hundred Control Group and Test Group participants. From the data received from questionnaire #1, it was possible to establish a baseline for evaluating and measuring the effectiveness of the Spiritual Formation Program. The questionnaire listed twenty statements based on the Christian's life, and the participants from both groups were required to indicate their answers on a scale of 1 to 5. Their answers provided insight into many areas of the participants' lives in terms of Christian maturity. The charts below offer data from questionnaire #1 in various comparisons, i.e. comparison between Control Group and Test Group (Figure 4.1.) and Ethnicity (Figure 4.2) and Gender comparisons (Figure 4.3.) on pre-test scores on Christian maturity. Corresponding T-test results are also listed below.

Figure 4.1. Questionnaire #1: Test Group & Control Group Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Pre-Test

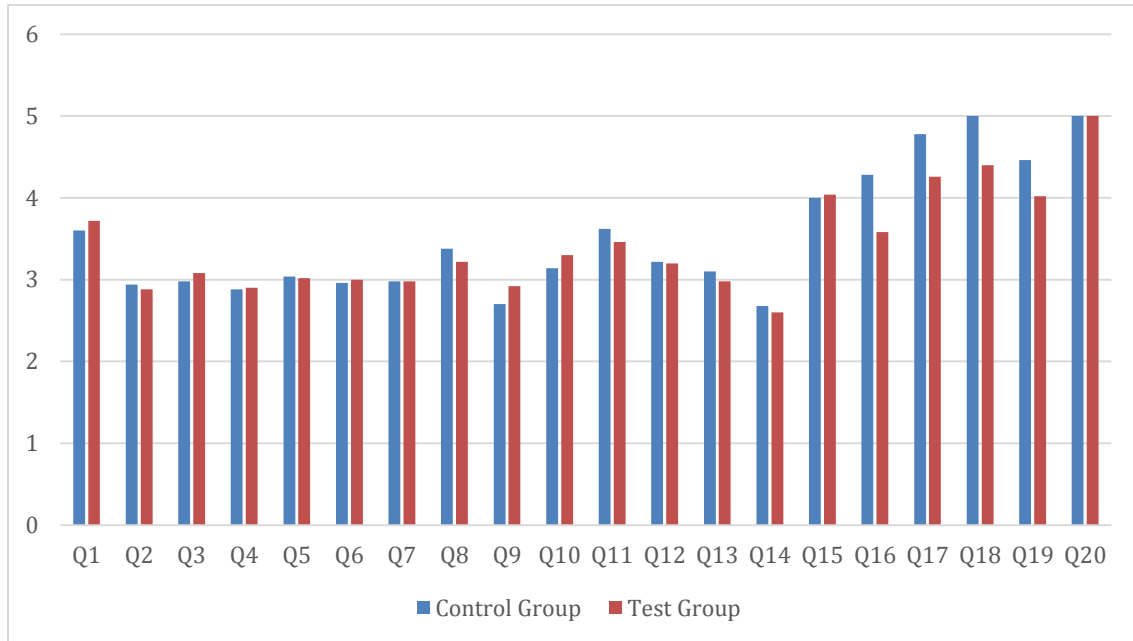


Table 4.3. Questionnaire #1: T-test Results for the Test Group and Control Group Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Pre-Test

Unpaired t test		Test Group & Control Group Comparison
1	Table Analyzed	Unpaired t test data
2		
3	Column B	Test Group
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Control Group
6		
7	Unpaired t test	
8	P value	0.6269
9	P value summary	ns
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
12	t, df	t=0.49 df=38
13		
14	How big is the difference?	
15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.537 ± 0.1728, n=20
16	Mean ± SEM of column B	3.428 ± 0.14, n=20
17	Difference between means	-0.109 ± 0.2224
18	95% confidence interval	-0.5593 to 0.3413
19	R squared (eta squared)	0.00628
20		
21	F test to compare variances	
22	F, DFn, Dfd	1.524, 19, 19
23	P value	0.3665
24	P value summary	ns

Based on the data of questionnaire #1, the current level of Christian maturity among both Test Group and Control Group participants were quite similar. The sum total of the Control Group participants for the presented questions was 3537 at an average of 176.85 and a mean average of 3.5370. The sum total of the Test Group participants for the presented questions was 3428 at an average of 171.4 and a mean average of 3.4280. The two-tailed p-value equals 0.6269. By conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be not statistically significant.

In both the Control and Test groups, the highest value indicated was for question #20. All one hundred participants indicated the value of 5 for "*I believe that the Great Commission is a mandate to be obeyed. I am currently discipling a group of believers to greater spiritual maturity.*" In both Control and Test groups, the lowest value indicated was for question #14, "*I have victory over my thought life. The Spirit helps me overcome wrong attitudes, lust and negative feelings.*" In the Control Group the mean average for question #14 was 2.68 and 3 for the Test Group. Overall, there was nothing statistically significant to differentiate the level of Christian maturity between the Control Group and Test Group participants.

Figure 4.2. Questionnaire #1: Ethnic Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Pre-Test –Merged Ethnic Graphs

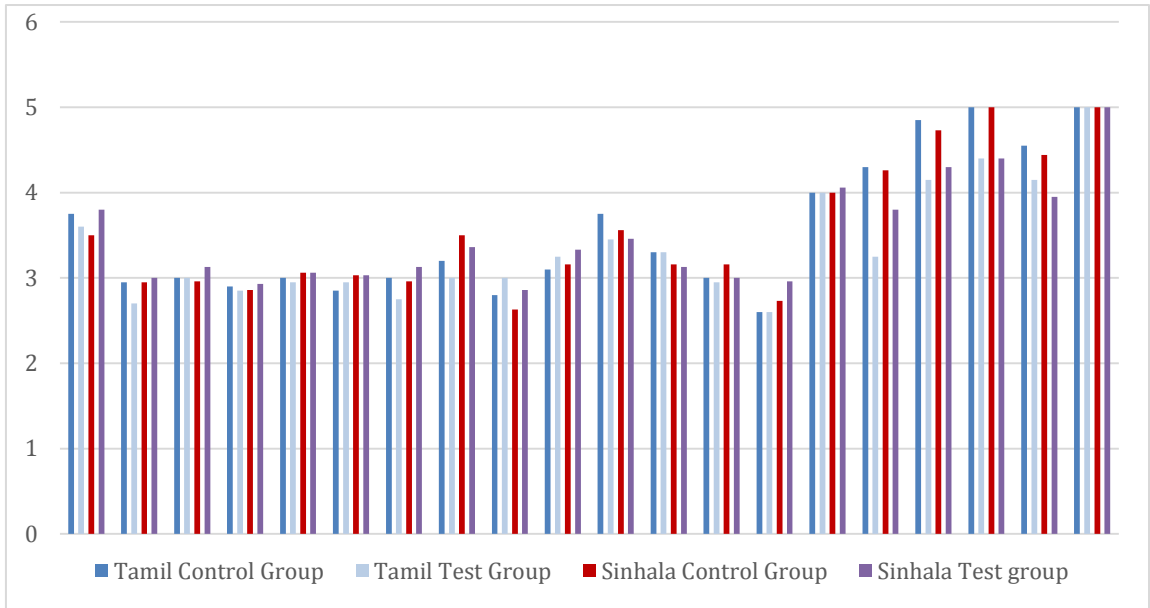


Table 4.4. Questionnaire #1: T-test Results for the Ethnic Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Pre-Test

Tamil T-Test

Sinhala T-Test

Unpaired t test		ETHNIC COMPARISON TAMIL	Unpaired t test		ETHNIC COMPARISON SINHALA
1	Table Analyzed	Unpaired t test data	1	Table Analyzed	Unpaired t test data
2			2		
3	Column B	Tamil Test Group	3	Column B	SINHALA TEST GROUP
4	vs.	vs.	4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Tamil Control Group	5	Column A	SINHALA CONTROL GROUP
6			6		
7	Unpaired t test		7	Unpaired t test	
8	P value	0.4391	8	P value	0.8262
9	P value summary	ns	9	P value summary	ns
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No	10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed	11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
12	t, df	t=0.782 df=38	12	t, df	t=0.2211 df=38
13			13		
14	How big is the difference?		14	How big is the difference?	
15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.545 ± 0.1783, n=20	15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.533 ± 0.171, n=20
16	Mean ± SEM of column B	3.365 ± 0.1456, n=20	16	Mean ± SEM of column B	3.485 ± 0.1337, n=20
17	Difference between means	-0.18 ± 0.2302	17	Difference between means	-0.048 ± 0.2171
18	95% confidence interval	-0.646 to 0.286	18	95% confidence interval	-0.4874 to 0.3914
19	R squared (eta squared)	0.01584	19	R squared (eta squared)	0.001285
20			20		
21	F test to compare variances		21	F test to compare variances	
22	F, DFn, Dfd	1.498, 19, 19	22	F, DFn, Dfd	1.636, 19, 19
23	P value	0.3863	23	P value	0.2920
24	P value summary	ns	24	P value summary	ns
25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No	25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No

The above graph and chart compares the pre-test level of Christian maturity within the Tamil and Sinhala ethnic groups. In comparing the level of Christian maturity

between the Tamil Control Group and Test Group, based on the data of questionnaire #1, the current level of Christian maturity among both groups was quite similar. The sum total of the Tamil Control Group participants for the presented questions was 1418 at an average of 70.9 and a mean average of 3.5450. The overall score of the Test Group participants for the presented questions was 1346 at an average of 67.3 and a mean average 3.3650. The two-tailed p-value equals 0.4391, which means that the difference between the responses of both groups is not statistically significant.

In comparing the level of Christian maturity between the Sinhala Control Group and Test Group, based on the data of questionnaire #1, the current level of Christian maturity among both groups was also quite similar in comparison. The sum total of the Control Group participants for the presented questions was 2120 at an average of 70.6 and a mean average of 3.5333. The overall score of the Test Group participants for the presented questions was 2082 at an average of 69.4 and a mean average 3.485. The two-tailed p-value of 0.8262 means that this difference is not statistically significant.

Both Tamil and Sinhala Control groups indicate a slightly higher response to question #16 (concerning generosity), question #17 (concerning ministry), and question #18 (concerning discipleship) as opposed to their test group counterparts. In light of the overall results, these variations are not deemed particularly significant.

Figure 4.3. Questionnaire #1: Gender Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Pre-Test - Merged Gender Graphs

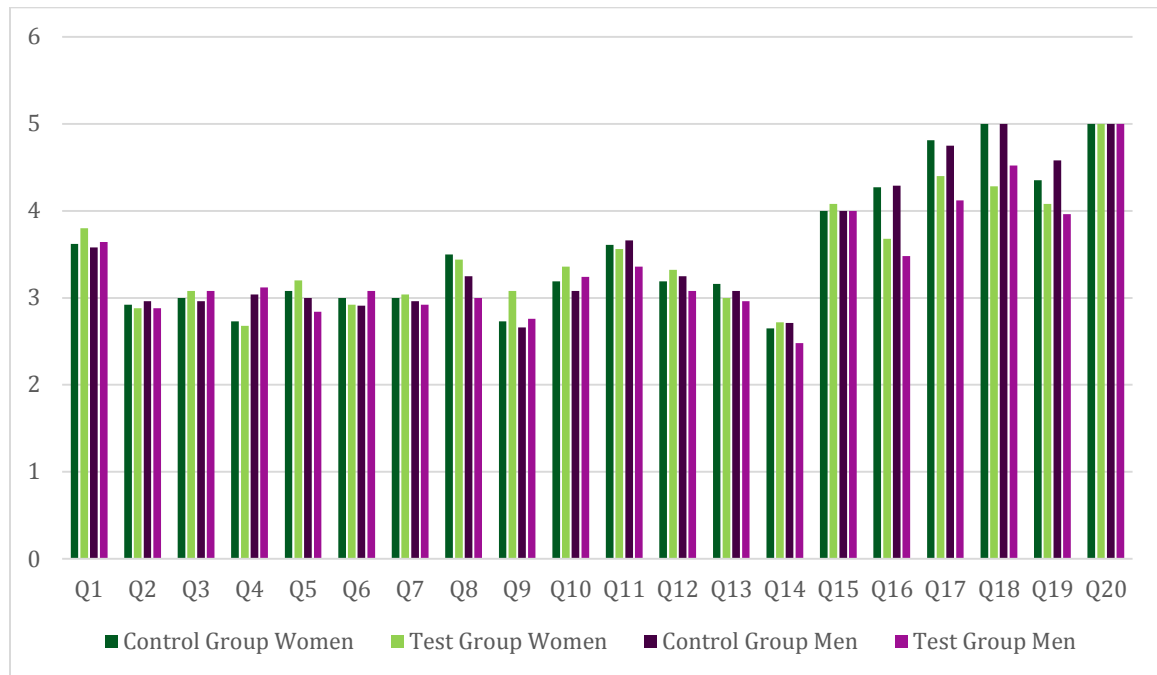


Table 4.5. Questionnaire #1: T-Test Results for Gender Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Pre-Test

Female T-Test

Male T-Test

Unpaired t test		GENDER COMPARISON FEMALE	Unpaired t test		Gender Comparison Male
1	Table Analyzed	Unpaired t test data	1	Table Analyzed	Unpaired t test data
2			2		
3	Column B	Test group Female	3	Column B	Test group Male
4	vs.	vs.	4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Control Group Female	5	Column A	Control Group Male
6			6		
7	Unpaired t test		7	Unpaired t test	
8	P value	0.7864	8	P value	0.4843
9	P value summary	ns	9	P value summary	ns
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No	10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed	11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
12	t, df	t=0.2729 df=38	12	t, df	t=0.7064 df=38
13			13		
14	How big is the difference?		14	How big is the difference?	
15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.541 ± 0.1721, n=20	15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.536 ± 0.1747, n=20
16	Mean ± SEM of column B	3.48 ± 0.1397, n=20	16	Mean ± SEM of column B	3.376 ± 0.1441, n=20
17	Difference between means	-0.0605 ± 0.2217	17	Difference between means	-0.16 ± 0.2265
18	95% confidence interval	-0.5093 to 0.3883	18	95% confidence interval	-0.6185 to 0.2985
19	R squared (eta squared)	0.001956	19	R squared (eta squared)	0.01296
20			20		
21	F test to compare variances		21	F test to compare variances	
22	F, DFn, Dfd	1.517, 19, 19	22	F, DFn, Dfd	1.469, 19, 19
23	P value	0.3721	23	P value	0.4093
24	P value summary	ns	24	P value summary	ns
25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No	25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No

The above graph and chart compares the pre-test level of Christian maturity within the Female and Male gender groups. Based on the data collected, the sum total of the Female Control Group participants for the presented questions was 1840 at an average of 70.76 and a mean average of 3.541. The sum total of the Female Test Group participants for the presented questions was 1740 at an average of 69.6 and a mean average 3.4800. The two-tailed p-value equals 0.7864, which means, by conventional criteria, the overall difference is not statistically significant. Based on the data collected, the sum total of the Male Control Group participants for the presented questions was 1840 at an average of 70.76 and a mean average of 3.536. The overall score of the Test Group participants for the presented questions was 1740 at an average of 69.6 and a mean average 3.376. The two-tailed p-value equals 0.4843, which means, by conventional criteria, the difference is considered to be not statistically significant.

There are noticeable variations on how both genders responded to question #16 (concerning generosity), question #17 (concerning ministry), and question #18 (concerning discipleship). Both Female and Male Control Group participants had indicated a higher value as opposed to both Female and Male Test Group participants. There is also a noticeable variation on question #19 concerning weekly evangelism, where the men from the Test Group had the lowest value for weekly evangelism. However, in light of the overall results, these variations were not specifically significant.

In summary, based on the data collected from questionnaire #1, it was possible to determine that there was no significant statistical difference between the overall Control Group and Test Group pre-test responses in terms of their Christian maturity. Nor were there any significant differences when comparing ethnicities or genders. This was not

particularly surprising since all one hundred participants were House Church Leaders who had undergone similar training and were actively involved in ministry.

Research Question #2: Description of Evidence

What is the level of change in Christian maturity among the house church leaders after undertaking the study?

Research Question #2 was addressed through the quantitative questionnaire #2 (Christian Maturity Questionnaire: Appendix E) to determine the level of change in Christian maturity of those who had been exposed to the Spiritual Formation Program. As explained previously, for this study, the one hundred participants were divided into two groups, a Control Group and a Test Group. The Test Group was exposed to the four-week study, while the Control Group was not aware of such a program. After four weeks, the same Christian Maturity questionnaire (Appendix E) that was completed by the one hundred participants prior to exposing the Test Group to the Spiritual Formation Program was completed by all one hundred Control Group and Test Group participants. From the data received from the second questionnaire, it was possible to investigate the level of change in Christian maturity in the participants post-test after four weeks.

The charts below offer data in various comparisons, i.e. comparison between pre-test questionnaire #1 and post-test questionnaire #2 Control Group comparison (Figure 4.4.), pre-test questionnaire #1 and post-test questionnaire #2 Test Group comparison (Figure 4.5.), questionnaire #2: Control Group / Test Group comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-test (Figure 4.6.), pre-test questionnaire #1 and post-test questionnaire #2 Control Group and Test Group comparison on Christian Maturity (Figure 4.7.), Questionnaire #2: Ethnic Comparison on Christian Maturity on the post-

test (Figure 4.8.), Questionnaire #2: Gender comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-Test (Figure 4.9.), and a comparison of Control Group and Test Group pre-test and post-test aggregates (Figure 4.10.). Corresponding t-test charts are also included.

Figure 4.4. Pre-Test Questionnaire #1 and Post-Test Questionnaire #2 Control Group Comparison

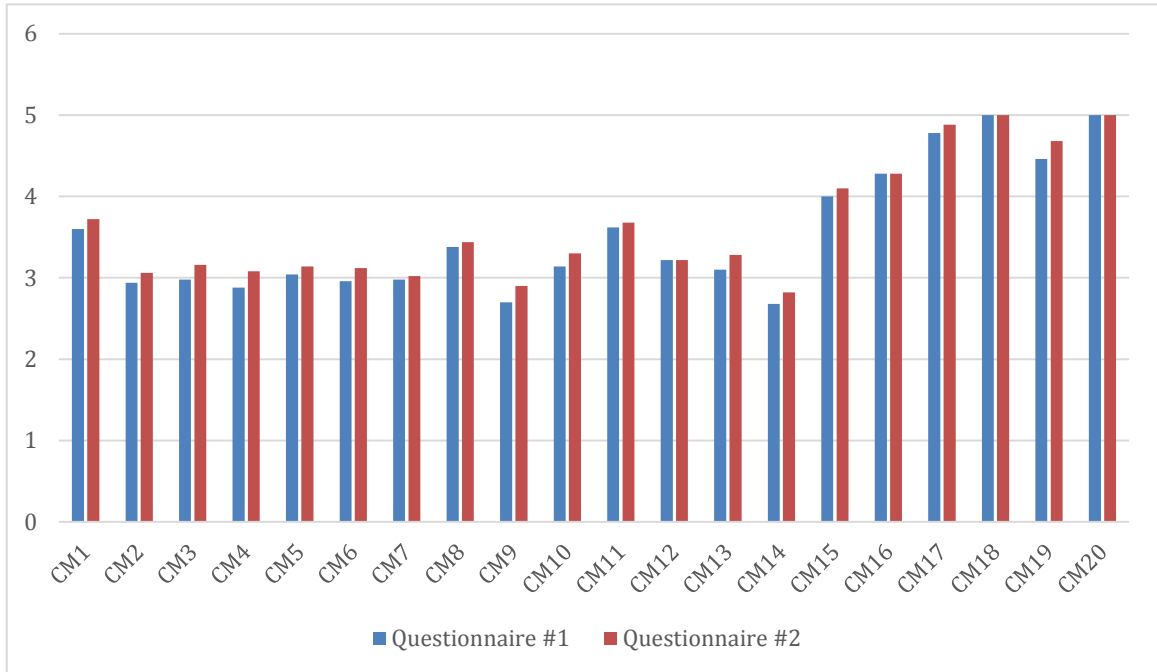


Table 4.6. Questionnaire #2: Control Group Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-Test T-Test Results

Paired t test		Control Group
1	Table Analyzed	Paired t test data
2		
3	Column B	Post-Test
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Pre-Test
6		
7	Paired t test	
8	P value	<0.0001
9	P value summary	****
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
12	t, df	t=6.511 df=19
13	Number of pairs	20
14		
15	How big is the difference?	
16	Mean of differences	0.107
17	SD of differences	0.07349
18	SEM of differences	0.01643
19	95% confidence interval	0.0726 to 0.1414
20	R squared (partial eta squared)	0.6905
21		
22	How effective was the pairing?	
23	Correlation coefficient (r)	0.9962
24	P value (one tailed)	<0.0001
25	P value summary	****
26	Was the pairing significantly effective?	Yes

After four weeks data collected from questionnaire #2 revealed a change in the level of Christian maturity in the Control Group. The sum total of the Control Group participants for the presented questions was 3644 at an average of 72.88 and a mean average of 3.6440. This is an increase of the sum total of 3538 at an average of 70.76 and a mean average of 3.5370. The mean difference was 0.107. The two-tailed p-value is less than 0.0001, which means that by conventional criteria this difference is considered to be statistically significant.

In all of the areas presented through the twenty questions of the Christian Maturity Questionnaire, there was a slight increase in the level of Christian maturity in the Control Group participants during the four-week period. Given that the Control

Group participants are house church leaders, fully engaged in ministry, who form the backbone of church leadership, and are exposed to their individual church leadership development and accountability processes, the increase in the level of Christian maturity, although marginal, was anticipated.

Figure 4.5. Pre-Test Questionnaire #1 and Post-Test Questionnaire #2 Test Group Comparison

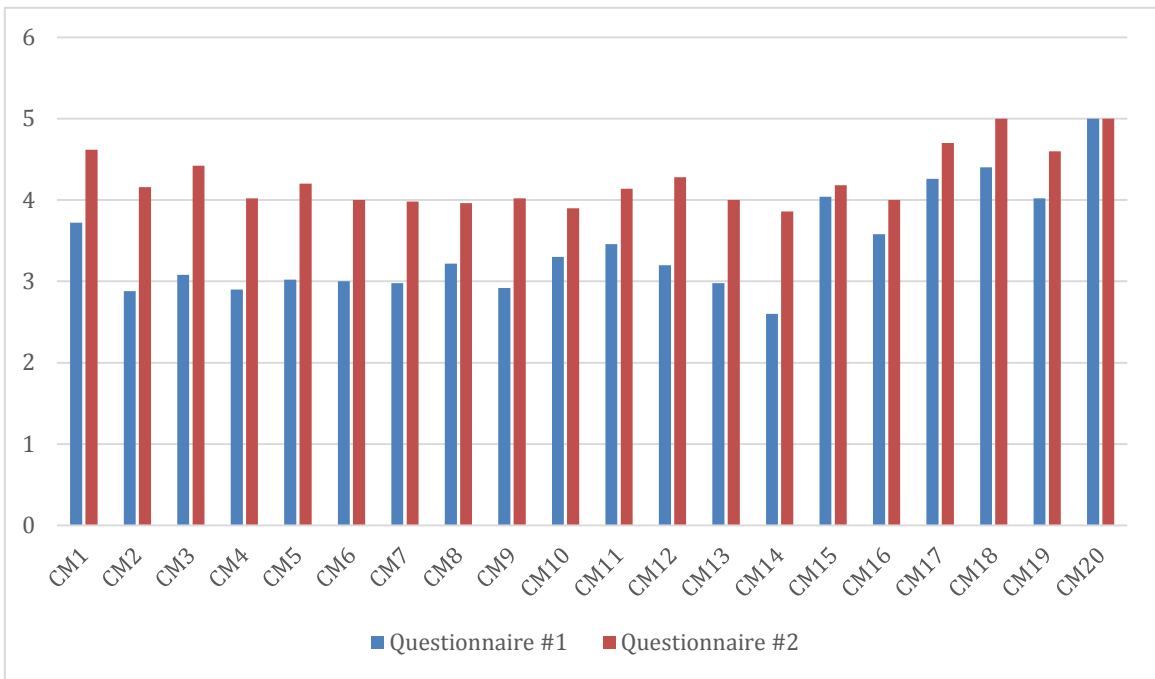


Table 4.7. Pre-Test Questionnaire #1 and Post-Test Questionnaire #2 Test Group Comparison T-Test Results

Paired t test		Test Group Post Test
1	Table Analyzed	Paired t test data
2		
3	Column B	post-test questionnaire
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Pre-test questionnaire
6		
7	Paired t test	
8	P value	<0.0001
9	P value summary	****
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
12	t, df	t=9.648 df=19
13	Number of pairs	20
14		
15	How big is the difference?	
16	Mean of differences	0.824
17	SD of differences	0.3819
18	SEM of differences	0.0854
19	95% confidence interval	0.6452 to 1.003
20	R squared (partial eta squared)	0.8305
21		
22	How effective was the pairing?	
23	Correlation coefficient (r)	0.8387
24	P value (one tailed)	<0.0001
25	P value summary	****
26	Was the pairing significantly effective?	Yes

After four weeks of undertaking the spiritual formation program, data collected from questionnaire #2 revealed a significant change in the level of Christian maturity in the Test Group. The sum total of the Test Group participants for the presented questions was 4252 at an average of 85.4 and a mean average of 4.2529. This is an increase from a pre-test sum total of 3428 at an average of 68.56 and a mean average of 3.4280 in questionnaire #1. The mean difference is 0.824. The two-tailed p-value is less than 0.0001, which means that by conventional criteria this difference is considered to be extremely statistically significant. In all of the areas presented through the twenty questions of the Christian Maturity Questionnaire, there was a significant increase in the level of Christian maturity in the Test Group participants during the four-week period,

with significant increases in all the questions except questions #15 through #20, where the increases are not that proportionately significant.

Figure 4.6. Questionnaire #2: Control Group / Test Group Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-Test

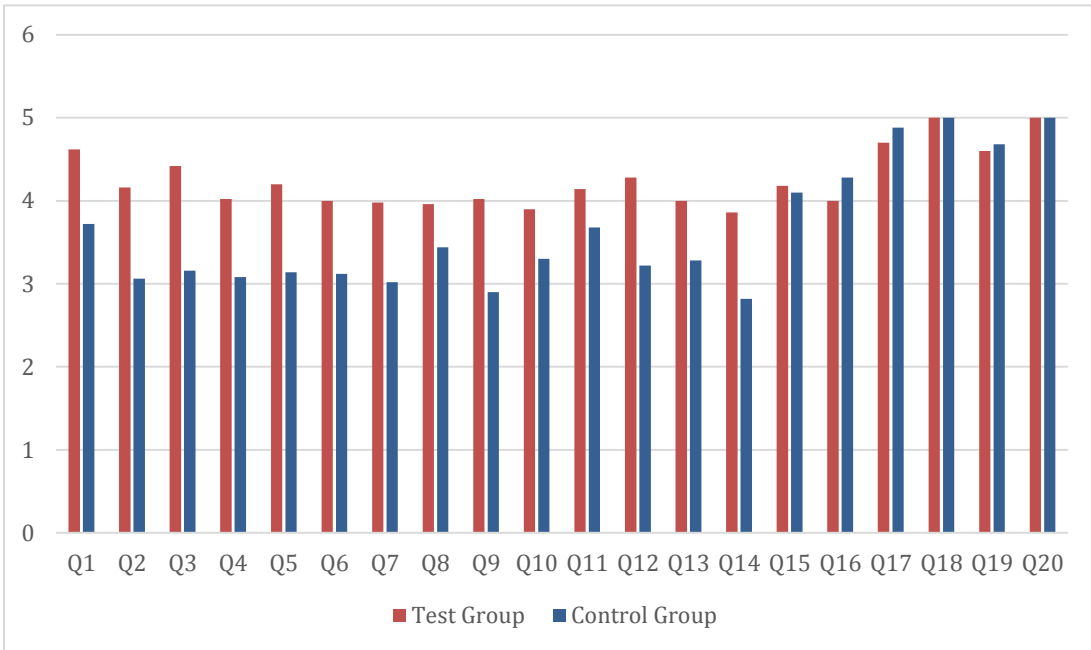


Table 4.8. Questionnaire #2: Control Group /Test Group Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-Test T-Test Results

Unpaired t test		CONTROL GROUP VS TEST GROUP
1	Table Analyzed	Paired t test data
2		
3	Column B	TEST GROUP POST TEST
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	CONTROL GROUP POST TEST
6		
7	Unpaired t test	
8	P value	0.0020
9	P value summary	**
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
12	t, df	t=3.315 df=38
13		
14	How big is the difference?	
15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.644 ± 0.1655, n=20
16	Mean ± SEM of column B	4.252 ± 0.07896, n=20
17	Difference between means	0.608 ± 0.1834
18	95% confidence interval	0.2367 to 0.9793
19	R squared (eta squared)	0.2243
20		
21	F test to compare variances	
22	F, DFn, Dfd	4.396, 19, 19
23	P value	0.0022
24	P value summary	**
25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes

Based on the data of post-test questionnaire #2, there was an increase in the level of Christian maturity among both Test Group and Control Group participants during the four-week period after completing pre-test questionnaire #1. However, the data gathered from questionnaire #2 reveals that after four weeks of undertaking the spiritual formation program the Christian maturity level of the Test Group had increased significantly more than the increase in the Control Group.

The sum total of the Test Group participants for the presented questions of post-test questionnaire #2 was 4252 at an average of 212.6 and a mean average of 4.2520. This is an increase from the sum total of 3428 at an average of 171.4 and a mean average of 3.4280 in the pre-test questionnaire #1.

The sum total of the Control Group participants for the presented questions of post-test questionnaire #2 was 3644 at an average of 72.88 and a mean average of 3.6440.

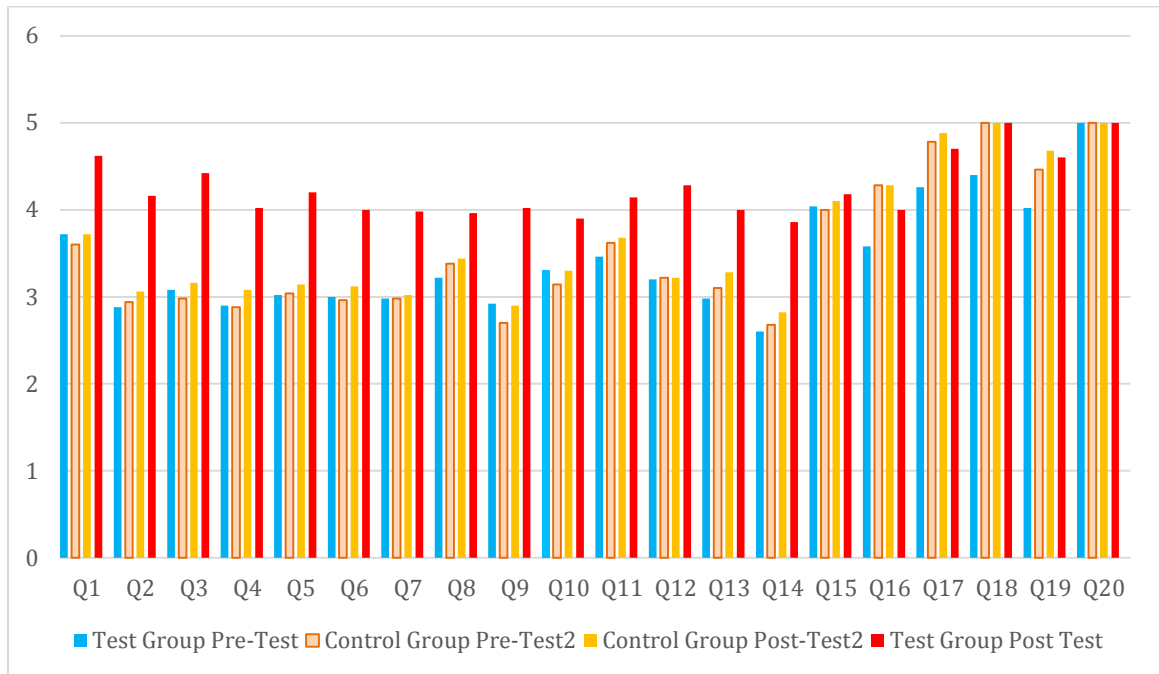
This is an increase of the sum total of 3538 at an average of 70.76 and a mean average of 3.5370 in the pre-test questionnaire #1.

The quantitative data gathered from questionnaire #1 and #2 indicate that the Test Group recorded significant increases in the level of Christian maturity. The difference of the sum total between the pre-test questionnaire #1 and the post-test questionnaire #2 was 824 at an average difference of +41.2 and a mean difference of +0.8249.

The Control Group also recorded increases in the level of Christian maturity; however, the difference was marginal in comparison, with the difference of the sum total between pre-test questionnaire #1 and post-test questionnaire #2 being 106 at an average difference of +2.12 and a mean difference of +0.107.

Based on these statistics, it is possible to determine that, though both Control and Test groups recorded a positive level of change in Christian maturity, the four-week Spiritual Formation Program had a significant impact on the Test Group participants which led to a significant increase in the level of Christian maturity in comparison to the Control Group participants.

Figure 4.7. Pre-Test Questionnaire #1 and Post-Test Questionnaire #2 Control Group and Test Group Comparison on Christian Maturity



The graph above (Figure 4.7.) combines the data of the pre-test questionnaire #1 and post-test questionnaire #2 of both Control and Test Groups indicated in figure 4.4, figure 4.5, and figure 4.6. to better illustrate the level of change in Christian maturity after the Spiritual Formation Program.

As mentioned earlier, based on the post-test data of questionnaire #2, compared with the pre-test data of questionnaire #1, the level of Christian maturity among both Test Group and Control Group participants had increased during the four-week period. However, the data also revealed that after four weeks of practicing the Spiritual Formation Program the Christian maturity level of the Test Group had increased significantly more than the marginal increase in the Control Group. It is also of importance to note that the growth in the levels of Christian maturity in the Test Group participants particularly occurred in the areas where the Control Group participants struggled to achieve even moderate growth (questions #2 - #14). The Christian maturity

questionnaire that was used in the research process could be divided into three main parts:

The Christian's devotional and inner life: questions #1 to #6

The Christian's behavior and conduct: questions #7 - #14

The Christian's service and ministry: questions #16 - #20.

Both the Control and Test Group participants, being house church leaders who are actively involved in ministry, consistently indicated high values in the area of ministry, evangelism, and service as described in questions #16 - #20. These values are consistent with house church leaders whose ministry involves evangelism, preaching, ministering to their believers, and discipling new converts. Comparatively, however, both groups indicated lower values for devotional and inner life as well as behavior and conduct.

The data presented in the above graph indicates strong levels of growth in the Test Group participants' devotional and inner life and in the participants' practice and behavior, areas which were relatively weak in comparison to the participants' ministry and service. The difference in the increase of Christian maturity in the Test Group participants and Control Group participants in questions #1 - #14, areas pertaining to their inner lives, character, and behavior is note-worthy. The graph further reveals a more mature and balanced house church leader in the Test Group participants at the end of the four-week study. In summary, while there was a certain level of increase in Christian maturity in the Control Group participants, there was a significant increase in the level of Christian maturity in the Test Group participants, providing support for the value and impact of the Spiritual Formation Program.

Figure 4.8. Questionnaire #2: Ethnic Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-Test

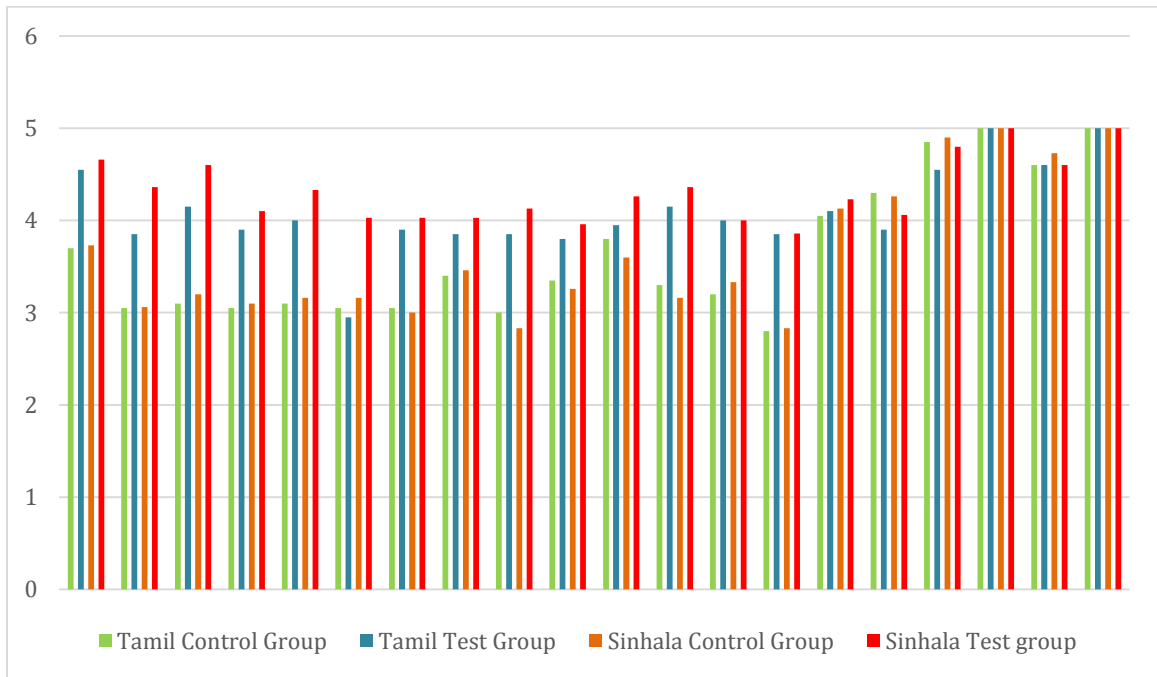


Table 4.9. Questionnaire #2: Ethnic Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-Test T-test Results

Unpaired t test		Post-Test Ethnic Tamil
1	Table Analyzed	Paired t test data
2		
3	Column B	Tamil Test Group
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Tamil Control Group
6		
7	Unpaired t test	
8	P value	0.0239
9	P value summary	*
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
12	t, df	t=2.353 df=38
13		
14	How big is the difference?	
15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.638 ± 0.1643, n=20
16	Mean ± SEM of column B	4.095 ± 0.1039, n=20
17	Difference between means	0.4575 ± 0.1944
18	95% confidence interval	0.06391 to 0.8511
19	R squared (eta squared)	0.1272
20		
21	F test to compare variances	
22	F, DFn, Dfd	2.5, 19, 19
23	P value	0.0526
24	P value summary	ns
25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	No

Unpaired t test		Post-Test Ethnic Sinhala
1	Table Analyzed	Unpaired t test data
2		
3	Column B	Post-Test Test Group Sinhala
4	vs.	vs.
5	Column A	Post-Test Control Group Sinhala
6		
7	Unpaired t test	
8	P value	0.0008
9	P value summary	***
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed
12	t, df	t=3.663 df=38
13		
14	How big is the difference?	
15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.645 ± 0.1671, n=20
16	Mean ± SEM of column B	4.32 ± 0.07764, n=20
17	Difference between means	0.675 ± 0.1843
18	95% confidence interval	0.3019 to 1.048
19	R squared (eta squared)	0.2609
20		
21	F test to compare variances	
22	F, DFn, Dfd	4.635, 19, 19
23	P value	0.0016
24	P value summary	**
25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes

Tamil T-Test

Sinhala T-Test

The above graph compares the changes in the level of Christian maturity in the Tamil and Sinhala participants of the Control Group and Test Groups with the data gathered from the post-test questionnaire #2. Based on the data collected, the sum total of the Tamil Control Group participants for the presented questions of the post-test questionnaire #2 was 1455 at an average of 72.75 and a mean average of 3.638. The sum total of the Test Group participants for the presented questions was 1658 at an average of 82.9 and a mean average 4.095. The two-tailed p-value equals 0.0239; by conventional criteria this difference is considered statistically significant.

In comparison with the data gathered from questionnaire #1, both Control Group and Test Group Tamil participants indicated an increase in the level of Christian maturity. In the Control Group, the difference involved a sum total of 55 with a difference in the overall average of +1.85 and a mean variation of 0.0925. In the Test Group, the difference was more significant with an increase of a sum total of 312, a difference in the overall average of +15.8 and a mean variation of 0.73. Therefore, according to the quantitative data above, it is possible to determine that, while the Tamil Control Group participants recorded a positive level of change in Christian maturity, the four-week Spiritual Formation Program had an influential impact on the Tamil Test Group participants which led to a significant increase in the level of Christian maturity in comparison to the Control Group Tamil participants.

The above graph also compares the increase in the level of Christian maturity between the Sinhala participants of the Control Group and Test Group with the data gathered from the post-test questionnaire #2. Based on the data collected, the sum total of the Control Group participants for the presented questions in the post-test questionnaire

#2 was 2189 at an average of 72.9 and a mean average of 3.6450. The sum total of the Test Group participants for the presented questions in post-test questionnaire #2 was 2594 at an average of 86.46 and a mean average 4.3200. The two-tailed p-value was 0.0008, which means, by conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be statistically significant. Therefore, according to the quantitative data above, the Sinhala Test Group participants had a significant increase in the level of Christian maturity with a sum total difference of 3512, with an overall average increase of +17.06 and a mean variation of 0.73. as opposed to a marginal increase in the level of Christian maturity in the Sinhala Control Group participants, who registered an increase of a sum total of 69 an overall average of +2.3 and a mean variation of 0.1125.

Figure 4.9. Questionnaire #2: Gender Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-Test

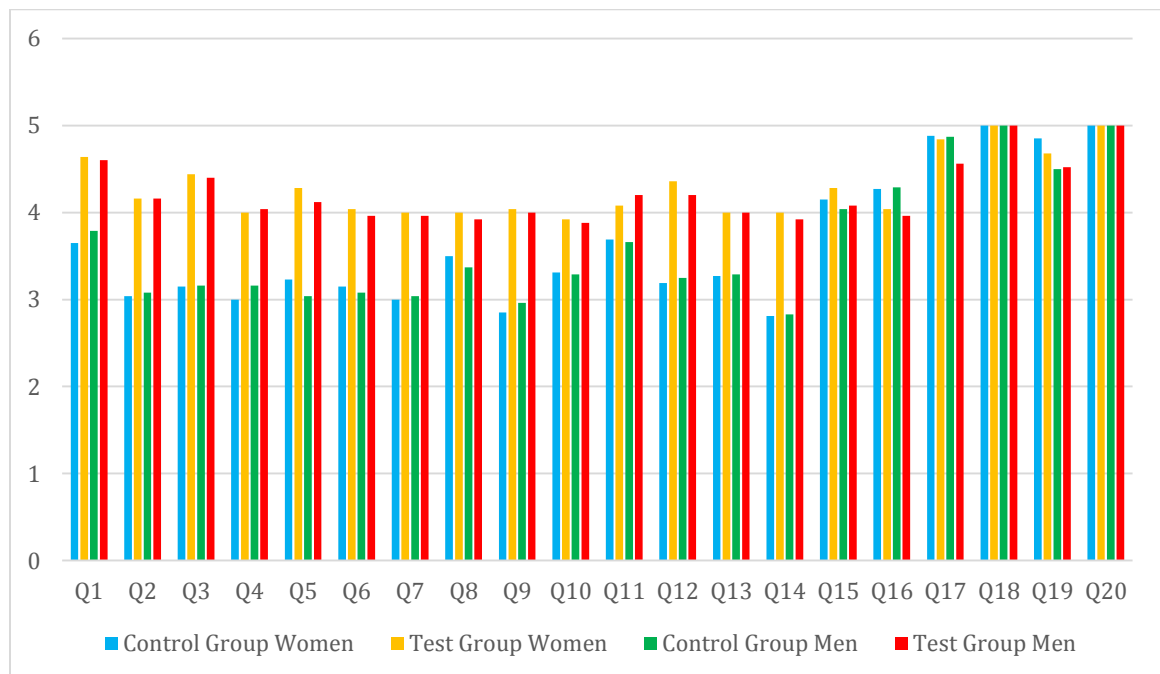


Table 4.10. Questionnaire #2: Gender Comparison on Christian Maturity on the Post-Test T-Test Results

Unpaired t test		Post-Test Gender Male	Unpaired t test	
1	Table Analyzed	Unpaired t test data	1	Table Analyzed
2			2	
3	Column B	Post-Test Test group Male	3	Column B
4	vs.	vs.	4	vs.
5	Column A	Post-Test Control Group Male	5	Column A
6			6	
7	Unpaired t test		7	Unpaired t test
8	P value	0.0022	8	P value
9	P value summary	**	9	P value summary
10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes	10	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?
11	One- or two-tailed P value?	Two-tailed	11	One- or two-tailed P value?
12	t, df	t=3.285 df=38	12	t, df
13			13	
14	How big is the difference?		14	How big is the difference?
15	Mean ± SEM of column A	3.635 ± 0.1618, n=20	15	Mean ± SEM of column A
16	Mean ± SEM of column B	4.224 ± 0.07713, n=20	16	Mean ± SEM of column B
17	Difference between means	0.589 ± 0.1793	17	Difference between means
18	95% confidence interval	0.2261 to 0.9519	18	95% confidence interval
19	R squared (eta squared)	0.2212	19	R squared (eta squared)
20			20	
21	F test to compare variances		21	F test to compare variances
22	F, DFn, Dfd	4.403, 19, 19	22	F, DFn, Dfd
23	P value	0.0022	23	P value
24	P value summary	**	24	P value summary
25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?	Yes	25	Significantly different (P < 0.05)?

Female T-Test

Male T-Test

The above graph compares the changes in the level of Christian maturity in the male and female participants of the Control Group and Test Group with the data gathered from the post-test questionnaire #2. Based on the data collected, the sum total of the Female Control Group participants for the presented questions in the post-test questionnaire #2 was 1898 at an average of 73 and a mean average of 3.645. The sum total of the Female Test Group participants for the presented questions in the post-test questionnaire #2 was 2145 at an average of 85.8 and a mean average 4.2900. The two-tailed p-value equals 0.0015, which means, by conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be very statistically significant. Based on the data collected from the male participants, the sum total of the Control Group male participants for the presented

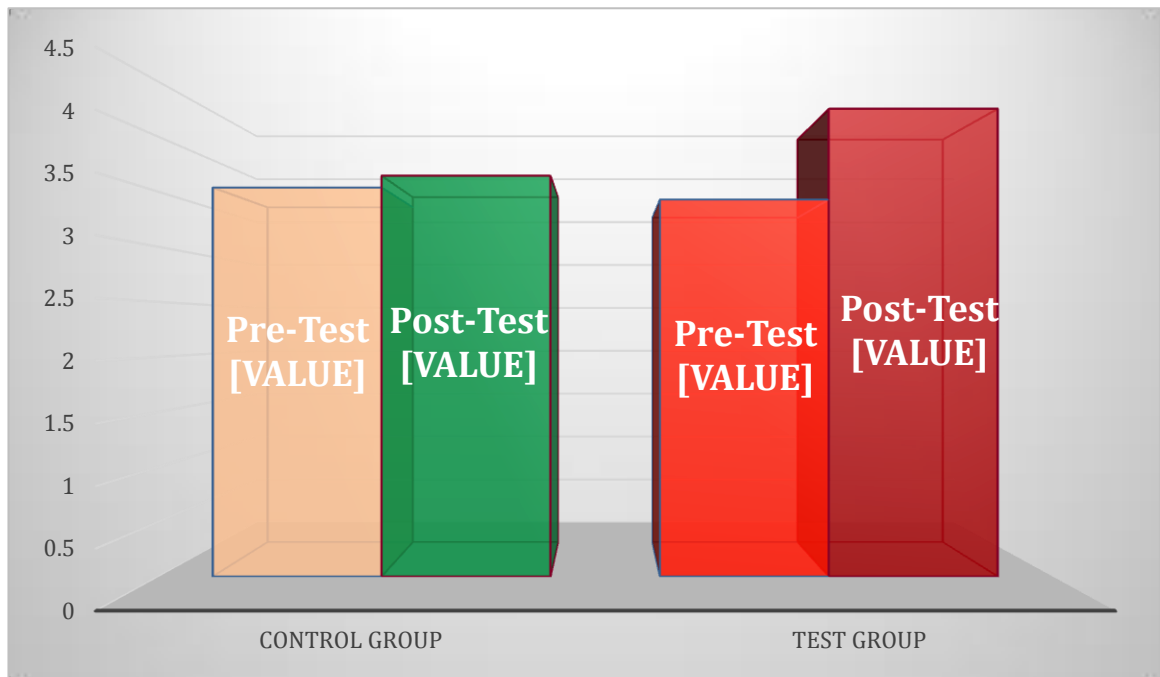
questions in the post-test questionnaire #2 was 1746 at an average of 72.75 and a mean average of 3.6350. The sum total of the Male Test Group participants for the presented questions in the post-test questionnaire #2 was 2107 at an average of 84.28 and a mean average 4.2240. The two-tailed p-value equaled 0.0022, which means, by conventional criteria, this difference is considered to be very statistically significant. By analyzing the data received from both pre-test questionnaire #1 and post-test questionnaire #2, both Control Group female and male participants had indicated a marginal increase in the level of Christian maturity, while the Test Group female and male participants indicated a significant increase in the level of Christian maturity.

In summary, the qualitative data gathered from the post-test questionnaire #2 in comparison to the data collected from the pre-test questionnaire #1 gives clear evidence that the Spiritual Formation Program greatly impacted the Test Group participants during the four-week test period and resulted in a significant increase in the levels of Christian maturity in the Test Group participants. In comparison, the Control Group participants indicated relatively marginal levels of increase in the level of Christian maturity during the same four-week period. The conclusive evidence is that the Spiritual Formation Program practiced by the Test group participants during the four-week period contributed to a significant increase in Christian maturity, strengthened their devotional and inner lives, influenced their conduct and behavior, and strengthened their service and ministry as house church leaders.

The table below summarizes the quantitative data segment of this study. While the Control Group, in comparison to the Test Group, recorded a marginally higher overall aggregate prior to the commencement of the Spiritual Formation Program, the Test

Group recorded the highest overall aggregate after the four-week Spiritual Formation Program, which indicated a significant rise in the level of Christian maturity in the Test Group participants.

Table 4.11. Comparison of Control Group and Test Group Pre-Test and Post-Test Aggregates



Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

What were the various elements of the Spiritual Formation Program that influenced and strengthened Christian maturity in the house church leaders?

In order to answer this research question, qualitative data was collected through a focus group meeting that was held on the February 24, 2018. Ten participants were selected from the Test Group for the Focus Group, and these participants represented the diversity of the test group in age, gender, and ethnicity. The Focus Group participants randomly selected identification numbers (FG1 – FG 10) which they used to identify themselves during the meeting. An independent moderator guided the participants through five questions, by asking, prompting and encouraging conversation to provide further depth and clarity to their responses. The meeting lasted 62:05 seconds.

Focus Question 1: Thinking back over the last four weeks would you share how you have grown in Christian maturity?

All ten of the Focus Group participants had positive feedback regarding the Spiritual Formation Program.

FG 5, who was the first to provide feedback to this question, said that though he had been a believer for some time, he had “never undergone such a program like the Spiritual Formation Program.” He commented that he felt he was being “led by God” over the four weeks, which created a deep desire for him to change certain areas in his life and to begin to do some things he should have been doing as a Christian and to do them well. Reflecting on the four weeks of the study, he felt he had grown more in these four weeks than all the time before this put together.

FG3 also commented on her growth by saying that the Bible is a completely new book to her now. The scriptures changed her and matured her immensely.

FG9 said the Spiritual Formation Program was a “life-changing” experience for her. Within two or three days she noticed a change in the way she was going about life. She shared how she had a problem with anger and would lose her cool easily at people who kept on doing the same wrong thing repeatedly, but during the four weeks of the Spiritual Formation Program, she grew in patience and became more open about this problem and was able to overcome it.

FG10 said that due to a serious motor cycle accident a week before the program started he spent a week in hospital and had to do surgery to reinsert all his teeth. He felt he had hit rock bottom. He was discouraged, down and out, and for him the Spiritual Formation Program was more than just a study. It was what lifted him up.

Many participants commented that they were able to bring about a certain level of balance to their lives which they had struggled to do in the past.

FG 4 mentioned how he had grown especially in his relationship with the Lord. He confessed struggling to balance time between his work, family, and ministry and invariably it was his prayer life that suffered. During the four weeks of the study, there was a big change in his life in terms of balance.

FG1 also commented that she had always desired to have a deep walk with the Lord, but her life was often chaotic, and she used to neglect the disciplines mentioned in the study. During the four weeks of the study, the Lord helped her to practice the spiritual formation program, and she is currently experiencing a great relationship with God that

she never had. She concluded by saying “Furthermore, during these four weeks, those in my home and those who live around me have been seeing a big change in my life.”

FG5 further commented that he struggled to balance work, ministry, family, and political work in the community. He was thankful for the personal rule of life that helped him put his life in balance. He also spoke about how he was able to tame his tongue:

“In my place of work, I work with an outside group who works for me on contract. I also engage in a lot of community work in the village. During the past four weeks I saw a great weakness in me in the words I use. I felt I was very loose with my words. I felt I needed to correct it, because as a Christian, my vocabulary must be different from those in the world. I generally tend to realize the gravity of my words only after I have said them. During the past weeks with God’s help I was able to correct myself. Through it I was able to have great discipline and many people who I work with and even people in my village noticed the difference too. They came and told me that they noticed that I had changed and that my words were different from before.”

FG6 commented that during the four weeks, since they had to be personally accountable to an accountability partner, he found it “very challenging and life changing” as he realized he was not just living for himself but for someone else.

FG7 was also thankful for the practice of accountability. He used to meet his accountability partner every week. He said, “just knowing that you have someone else in your life who identifies with you, who understands you and hears you out is a big strength. These four weeks, I never felt alone.” He mentioned that he was encouraged many times throughout the four weeks by his accountability partner.

FG8 mentioned that his prayer life had changed in the last four weeks compared with the eight and a half years before. He mentioned how in the past he used to pray a lot and in terms of how much and how often he prayed, he was doing very well, but this program helped him build a quality in his prayer life that he never had before.

FG2 responded by sharing how challenging her personal life had been because her husband had lost his job. She confessed that she generally becomes very tense and worried in times of trouble and the worry works over and over in her mind. However, during the Spiritual Formation Program, she was able to face some of the hardest challenges in her life without caving in as she would usually have done. She attributed this to the way she began to understand the scriptures after studying them the way she was taught to do in the Spiritual Formation Program. She commented how normally problems and worry would get her down, this time they became the very things through which she grew.

Everyone in the Focus Group agreed that they had grown tremendously in Christian maturity during the Spiritual Formation Program, that they had experienced a lot of change in the past four weeks. Many of them shared how their family members, their friends, the people who work with them and their fellow believers had noticed and commented that they had noticed the changes too.

Focus Group Question 2: *How did the Spiritual Formation Program strengthen Christian maturity in your life?*

The Spiritual Formation Program strengthened Christian maturity in the Focus Group participants in various ways, and the variety which they described how as strengthening was very insightful. Many of them spoke about being strengthened in their

inner lives, for example by finding strength in purpose, the courage to face hard times, strength to overcome discouragement and a sense of confidence that they did not possess before.

FG3 said that she was strengthened by a fresh encounter with the scriptures. In her words she said, “Now when I face a problem I first talk to God directly. I ask Him to fill me with His power and show me what to do. When I do this He speaks to me through His Word and that brings me great peace.”

FG 2 mentioned that she used to worry a lot. However, during the four weeks of the Spiritual Formation Program, the scriptures strengthened her spiritual life and she was able to overcome her issue with worry. She said, “the courage to face anything came from deep within me. Therefore, even if a problem that makes me want to worry comes up I now ignore it and keep my heart open to God.” **She** also expressed herself along similar lines,

My husband is the bread-winner in our house. Three months ago he met with an accident and has been at home. Therefore, we have many financial issues - I had to find ways to send the children to school. I can't explain how God brought me through - His guidance was beyond words. Each time He provided us with what was needed without causing embarrassment to us. I believe that this program came at the right time for me. It was a big influence and a strength. The way He took me through His Word was amazing. The scriptures really strengthened me. His Word would come to me over and over again each time I was faced with adversity. I am a much stronger person now.

FG5 was strengthened by God's leading. The Spiritual Formation Program helped him become more aware of God in and around him. Of recent he has been battling negative thoughts but during the four weeks he practiced the Spiritual Formation Program, God really began to strengthen his belief system. He stated that he has been able to overcome his negative thoughts, and God has given him strength to do things that seemed impossible to him with courage he believed he never had.

FG1 felt the same way. "To me it was just simply becoming aware of God. God has always been around and is with us but like little kids we get distracted so easily," she said. During the last four weeks she learnt to commit every problem, big or small, to God. She reflected how "God was within me like a friend" and "the things that would get me down have actually been opportunities that God used to strengthen me".

FG 6 also attributed the power of scripture as the source of his strengthened spiritual life. He reflected that in the past he would just read through the bible. But by reading, studying, meditating, and applying the Word in the way he was taught in the program, he was changed a lot. He shared this about his inner life,

When I was studying the book of Galatians in the first chapter Paul says his divine calling was not from man but from God. I had low self-esteem and sometimes sought acceptance from the world. But through this study, I realized that my identity is in God. I understood who I was in God and was able be strong in that. I took the time to read the bible - without reading through the bible in a rush, I really took the time to read it and my identity in God has never been stronger.

FG9 also attributed being strengthened over the last four weeks through the in-depth reading of the scriptures. She described it “like it sinks deep into you and it begins to affect your thoughts, your feelings and your ways.” She said she had heard how life-giving the scriptures were, but only now has she experienced it.

FG7 said that he found strength to remain confident when things were not going well in his life.

Focus Group Question 3: *What were the two most effective elements in the spiritual formation program?*

This was the key question that sought to provide the necessary qualitative data to answer research question #3.

FG2 began this conversation by saying that, to her, fasting and prayer were the two most effective elements. She said “when we fast and pray we experience God’s presence much more than when we just pray. I believe the combination of these two elements was most effective to me.” She also mentioned that the way she prayed before the Spiritual Formation Program and after it were completely different. She said that, to her, “prayer is now a conversation that never ends when you see Amen.”

FG1 felt that all the elements of the Spiritual Formation Program were very meaningful. In fact, she believed that it was the combination of the five disciplines that made the Spiritual Formation Program so effective. But since the question asked for the two most effective elements, she said that to her it was scripture reading and prayer that is offered in response to scripture.

FG8 felt the same way, that the reading of the scripture was the most influential element of the program for him, and that the reading of scripture also nourished his prayer life.

FG10 also commented that prayer was the element that influenced him the most. He said,

Before this program, I would pray 2 hours a day and then I would go and lead my life and I would not pray until night time. But I never actually had a conversational relationship with God. The way of praying according to the Spiritual Formation Program was revolutionary. It was as if God was everywhere and every time with me. Prayer became an exciting conversation and I built a friendship with God that I never had.

Accountability was the second most influential element for **FG10**.

FG3 and **FG7** said that the scripture is what really transformed them. **FG3** said that for her the scripture reading process she learnt at the Spiritual Formation Program changed her life completely. She reflected, “by reading the way I was taught, I was able to understand many weaknesses in my life. The reading of God’s Word according to the *lectio divina* way was transforming and helped me sort out a lot of issues in my life.”

FG7 mentioned how he used to read chapter after chapter of the Bible and all he got was head knowledge. There were times the scriptures spoke to him but more often it was just like reading a book. He explained it this way, “this new way of reading that was taught to me turned my life upside down. It is as if the Bible came alive. It became a living thing. God spoke to me daily from it and it stuck in my mind and I felt compelled to change some of my ways.” **FG7** also commented that equally important to him was the rule of

life that helped him become a more balanced person and also become a better husband and father.

FG4 also commented that reading the scriptures in the way it was taught was the most powerful element and the peer-to-peer accountability was equally powerful too. Reflecting on this, he mentioned how the scriptures exposed many weaknesses in his inner life that needed to change. Before this program, he would read the scriptures but did not give them time to soak in and go inside. He further commented by saying “I didn’t absorb the scriptures into my life enough and therefore application was poor. But now because of how I have been taught to read the Word I have been able to address many weaknesses and make the changes in my life so I can move forward.”

For **FG5**, the personal rule of life and peer-to-peer accountability were the most effective elements. The personal rule of life helped bring a lot of balance to his time-constrained life and in his words ‘I really needed some structure and balance in my life and the personal rule of life helped me prioritize and give attention to what mattered most. He also mentioned the role accountability played in his spiritual formation, “After being accountable with someone you feel so free. Whatever big thing that I had kept inside of me which I couldn’t tell anyone else I told my partner. It is by sharing our difficulties that we are released to step out to face the next week.”

FG6 also mentioned that accountability and the personal rule of life had the most transformative influence in his life. Commenting on accountability,

By sharing and opening myself to another person and in turn that person opening up to me, and being able to openly say, “I did this, or I didn’t do this”, and to have someone to pray with me and pray for me really transformed my life. I would

actually wait eagerly for the day I would meet with my accountability partner. Even before I go, I check whether I have fulfilled all the accountability questions. The fact that I had to answer if I was being truthful or not had a big impact on me. To have an open and honest relationship with an accountability partner made a huge difference in my life.

FG9 experienced much change through the personal rule of life. In addition to what she said earlier about how the scripture reading changed her deep within, she said that the rule of life helped her accomplish many things that she had put off for a lack of time or because other needs overwhelmed what she wanted to do. She commented on this by saying,

What made the most impact on my life was the 7 things I put down in my personal rule of life. I wrote 3 rules for my personal life; 1. getting up at 4.30 in the morning and praying, 2. memorizing a passage from the Bible passages I read that day, 3. and taking time to learn English and Tamil which I had begun some time ago but had not given time to. In my other rules of life, I made time for my family, making it a point to help someone in need every week, sharing the gospel with at least one person a week, making a commitment to pray every day for every family I minister to. I am just so amazed that how God enabled me to accomplish all on my personal rule barring the time to learn the 2 languages. The rule of life had a huge impact on my life. It was a source of tremendous strength.

Table 4.12. Focus Group Participants’ Responses to Focus Group Question #3: *What were the two most effective elements in the spiritual formation program?*

Partici	F	Scripture	Persona	Peer to
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pants	raye	asting	Reading (Lectio Divina)	1 Rule of Life	Peer Accountability
FG1		2			
FG2			1		
FG3			1	2	
FG4			1		2
FG5				1	2
FG6				2	1
FG7			1	2	
FG8			1		
FG9			1		2
FG10			1		2

Question 4: *Did you face any challenges that negatively affected your commitment to the Spiritual Formation Program?*

The participants highlighted their challenges at the work place, the time constraints of balancing work, family, and ministry, the challenges of ministry itself, and issues within the family as key challenges that they had to face in the four weeks of the study. **FG3** commented, “my biggest challenge was time. There were days that I was so tired, working non-stop and then when I got back home I had to do all the work by myself as my husband’s father has been ill and he goes to take care of him at night. On busy days like that I am exhausted.” **FG5** mentioned, “Since I am involved at a political and leadership level in the village community and it was the election period I had to literally switch off my phone and stay behind closed doors on some days otherwise I would not have been able to do this program.” **FG7** and **FG10** both struggled with the challenges of ministry. **FG10** said, “Sometimes I would get discouraged by what is happening in ministry, sometimes people mess up, or believers don’t turn up for the house church and I get discouraged at times when

after all the hard work has been put in these things happen. Sometimes I don't feel like even praying." Some of the biggest challenges for the participants came from their families. Most of the Focus Group participants have unsaved loved ones in their near or immediate families. Many of them commented how their interpersonal relationships with their family members were very challenging at times.

FG4 reflecting on this area said,

Every time I sat down to pray, I would be disturbed by my unsaved mother or brother. The more I tried to seek God, the more the devil was messing them up, knowing that he can get to me through them. There were times that I was really down and felt like giving up on this formation program but thank God I did not give up. God helped me overcome all of it.

Question 5: *Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion?*

All the participants commented on how they plan to continue practicing the disciplines of the Spiritual Formation Program and even pass it on to their disciples and house churches members. The participants also were in agreement that such a spiritual formation program is absolutely essential to all leaders and if possible for believers too. The participants felt that since almost all of their house church members were first generation believers, new converts from other faiths, a spiritual formation program will help address the key issue of Christian maturity, something the participants felt was a pressing need in their churches. **FG5** said that "we have a responsibility to share this blessing with others so they can experience what we experienced." **FG5** and **FG4** said that the personal rule of life was a simple thing to do with very tangible results and that a lot of believers they lead struggle

in the faith because of a lack of balance. **FG6** in particular mentioned that he felt a lack of accountability was one of the main reasons for slow discipleship. As if to emphasize this point, **FG7, FG10, FG6, FG4** and **FG5** said that they were still planning on continuing to meet with their accountability partners weekly.

The Focus Group participants were also very passionate about introducing the *lectio divina* bible reading plan to their house churches and disciples. **FG3** and **FG2**, in fact, requested the moderator to inform the researcher to teach this reading plan to the other house church leaders in their church network. **FG9** summarized this in this manner,

I really believe a spiritual formation program like this is worthwhile for the rest of our people. This program has disciplined us and helped us adjust and change our lives. I think our testimony of how we live matters more than just sharing the Gospel by word of mouth. So if all of us can be formed and disciplined in this way and we mature and build our lives, we will automatically be effective witnesses. The problem with many believers is the difficulty in changing their character. Sharing the Gospel in our country already has its challenges. The lack of effective witness compounds this matter. It will be easier to win the lost if we first change our lives. This Spiritual Formation Program will give them the opportunity to experience transformation the way we have, and it will be worthwhile for their journey of life and powerful for their ministry as witnesses.

Summary of Major Findings

The mixed-methods design of this study utilized questionnaires to gather quantitative data and a focus group discussion to gather qualitative data. The combined

data provided valuable information and evidence on how a spiritual formation program can strengthen Christian maturity in a group of believers. In this study, this group was a selected group of house church leaders, from three fast-growing churches, whose congregations were 99% first generation Christians who had come to faith in Christ from Sinhalese-Buddhist and Tamil-Hindu backgrounds.

The research revealed the following four major findings.

1. A spiritual formation program is extremely effective in strengthening Christian maturity in Sri Lankan house church leaders whether one considers gender, ethnicity, or religious background.
2. Tangible and visible activities such as ministry and service are not the only evidences of Christian maturity. Christian Maturity also entails the formation of the inner life, an inner change that flows out into Christ-like living and serving.
3. The disciplines of study, meditation, and application of scripture are disciplines that must be included in any spiritual formation program.
4. The particular effectiveness of the disciplines of a personal rule of life and peer-to-peer accountability to a spiritual formation program in a Sri Lankan context.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNINGS REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

In theory, a believer's spiritual formation, which contributes to an intentional, consistent, and exponential development of Christian maturity, should be a natural phenomenon. However, the neglect of spiritual formation and the lack of Christian maturity are pressing problems in the modern church. Given the lack of formal and informal spiritual formation curriculums in Sri Lanka, the lack of accessible resources in native languages in comparison to the Western world, and a growing church which is contributing to a greater percentage of first-generation Christians, a lack of Christian maturity is a crucial problem in the church of Sri Lanka.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the changes in the level of Christian maturity among a selected group of house church leaders who participated in a spiritual formation program. For the purpose of this study, these spiritual formation practices included the disciplines of a deep consistent and relational prayer life, weekly fasting, the study and meditation of scripture based on the ancient *lectio divina* practice, living according to a personal rule of life, and weekly peer-to-peer accountability. The research was conducted across a four-week time period from January 24, 2018 to February 24, 2018. The research was a mixed-research design, where quantitative data, which was gathered through a pre-test and post-test questionnaire, was interpreted through statistical analysis and qualitative data was gathered through a ten-person focus group at the conclusion of the Spiritual Formation Program. The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data yielded four major findings. In this chapter, the four major findings are

discussed in greater detail with the researcher's observations, interactions with modern literature, and within a Biblical and theological framework. In addition, three key ministry implications are drawn from these findings, limitations of this research are considered and explored, and suggestions are given for further studies on this topic. A postscript is also included at the conclusion of this study.

Major Findings

A Spiritual Formation Program is extremely effective in strengthening Christian maturity in Sri Lankan House Church Leaders whatever their gender, ethnicity, or religious background.

The data gathered from the study provided strong evidence that the Spiritual Formation Program strengthened Christian maturity in the participants. First, the quantitative data revealed a significant level in the increase of Christian maturity. Each answer indicated in the post-test questionnaire revealed significant levels of growth in Christian maturity (Figure 4.5.). In answering question #3 (when I look back at my life a month ago, I can say I have grown in my walk with the Lord over the last 4 weeks), every participant indicated that they had grown in their walk with the Lord over the four weeks of the study, some by as much as 43.5%. The effectiveness of the Spiritual Formation Program transcended ethnic and religious backgrounds (Figure 4.8.). Sinhala participants from Buddhist backgrounds indicated that they had grown in their walk with the Lord by 46%, while Tamil participants from Hindu background recorded a 38% growth. The Spiritual Formation Program was also effective for both male and female participants (Figure 4.9.). Male participants said they had grown by 42.8% and the female participants said they had grown by 44.1%.

The effectiveness of the Spiritual Formation Program was also verbalized by the Focus Group who testified to the effectiveness of the study. All ten Focus Group participants had positive feedback regarding the Spiritual Formation Program. **FG 5** said he had “never undergone such a program like the Spiritual Formation Program” and felt he had grown more in these four weeks than all the time before this put together. **FG9** said the Spiritual Formation Program was a “life-changing” experience for her. Within two or three days she noticed a change in the way she was going about life. **FG10** said for him the Spiritual Formation Program was more than just a study; it was what lifted him up. **FG 4** said there was a big change in his life in terms of balance. **FG8** mentioned that his prayer life had changed in the last four weeks compared to the eight and a half years before.

Therefore, the first major finding of this research project affirms that a spiritual formation program can and will strengthen Christian maturity in Sri Lankan house church leaders. As discussed previously, Christian maturity does not take place automatically. Donald Whitney says, “becoming like Jesus doesn’t happen incidentally or automatically with the passing of birthdays” (278 Kindle). In order to build and strengthen Christian maturity in Sri Lankan house church leaders, an intentional and systematic process of spiritual formation will be of great benefit. As Henri Nouwen writes, “anyone who takes the spiritual life seriously and wants to enter more deeply into the encounter with God realizes immediately the need for formation and direction” (Kindle Loc 211-212). Mulholland Jr. claims that “spiritual formation is the primal reality of human existence” (25). The participants of this study grew in spiritual maturity because they underwent this process of spiritual formation.

It is also important to note that the participants were not taken out of their context for this study but were required to practice the Spiritual Formation Program in their day-to-day life and context. It is in the daily circumstances of life that spiritual formation takes place, where even the most mundane parts of life can become “expressions of the life of Christ in us” (Boa Kindle Loc 3765-3767). Gordon Smith affirms this point as well by saying “formation of the human soul occurs not so much in the unusual but in the daily life of the Christian believer” (pp 30-31 Kindle). A very real part of this “daily life” are the challenges of life that these participants faced. Some of the Focus Group participants described how, although extremely difficult at times, the Spiritual Formation program helped them grow spiritually through very challenging circumstances. **FG2**’s husband lost his job after an accident, but as she yielded to the Spirit’s working in her life, she came out a stronger person through this challenge. **FG7** met with a motorcycle accident where he lost all his teeth and was in the hospital for two weeks prior to the commencement of the study, but the spiritual formation program gave him strength to remain confident when life was at its worst. In their stories one sees how God uses difficulty and suffering to form spirituality. Gordon Smith comments on this theme in this manner,

A key thread that must run through any discussion of maturity in Christ is the formative power of suffering. In our lives and in our work we suffer with Christ as his joint heirs in suffering (Rom 8:17). And suffering will inevitably demarcate our relationships and our work. It is the context in which we live out our lives.

...Our theology of the Christian life must take account of how suffering, while an aberration in God’s creation and not integral to what God has made, is for now—

before Christ is revealed and all is well—a means by which God forms us and purifies us (Smith 30-31 Kindle).

Within the spiritual formation process, a spiritual discipline is something one offers to God as a means of grace to experience God in life (Mulholland 114). Spiritual disciplines provide the direction and the opportunity for the participants to be formed spiritually. If one likens spiritual formation to a journey, then the road to Christian maturity passes through the practice of spiritual disciplines: practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth in believers (Whitney 4). This particular study used five spiritual disciplines to bring participants into submission and effective co-operation with Christ (Willard 156 Kindle). Kenneth Boa explains the effectiveness of these spiritual disciplines, “By practicing them, we place our minds, temperaments, and bodies before God and seek the grace of his transformation” (Boa Kindle Loc1375-1377).

The five disciplines of this Spiritual Formation Program included the practice of prayer, study of scripture using the historical discipline of *lectio divina*, weekly fasting, living according to a personal rule of life, and opening up in a peer-to-peer accountability relationship. Prior to this study, the data from the pre-tests revealed that each of the participants practiced the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and scripture study in some form. However, when the participants were taught about these disciplines in greater depth and given the knowledge of how to practice them intentionally, the result was significant growth in spiritual maturity in the participants. Henri Nouwen writes,

Spiritual formation requires daily reflection and intentional practice. The process involves becoming aware, naming the condition, and following the subtle movements of the Spirit in our hearts and in our lives. Simply put, when the

human heart is open and responsive to the Spirit, healthy movements occur and spiritual formation happens unexpectedly and in a variety of ways (Kindle Loc 2164-2166).

Finally, one of the key observations from the Focus Group was that many of the participants shared how their family members, their friends, the people who work with them, and their fellow believers had noticed and commented on the changes too. The data from the pre-test and post-test quantitative data comparison attested to this key observation (Figure 4.5.), where the Test Group participants had indicated a growth of 43.6% to question #12 (My neighbors and friends will attest to my testimony. They will testify that my life matches what I say). This observation is particularly encouraging as it lends greater credibility to the effectiveness of the Spiritual Formation Program. The goal of spiritual formation is to develop Christian maturity towards Christ-likeness, and the spiritual formation process involves character transformation. Spiritual formation, through the work of the Holy Spirit, should produce character transformation (Wright 26 Kindle) as believers are formed into their new lives and Christ-like nature (Colossians 3:1-16, Ephesians 4:17 – 5:1) so that they can grow in every way to become like Christ (Ephesians 4:15). In summary, one of the major findings was that a spiritual formation program is extremely effective in strengthening Christian maturity in Sri Lankan house church leaders whatever their gender, ethnicity, or religious background.

Tangible and visible activities such as ministry and service are not the only evidences of Christian maturity. Christian Maturity also entails the formation of the inner life, an inner change that flows out into Christ-like living and serving.

Ministry and service are important spiritual disciplines and means of grace that contribute to assist the spiritual formation of believers. Foster says that service produces humility, and a person choosing to serve will find tremendous freedom in giving up the need to be in charge (<https://renovare.org/about/ideas/spiritual-disciplines>). Willard lists “service” as one of the main disciplines that make believers capable of receiving more of the Holy Spirit’s life and power in their lives (Willard 158 Kindle). Whitney writes that every Christian is expected to serve, for when God calls His elect to Himself, He calls no one to idleness (144 Kindle). Being involved in ministry is absolutely essential to the spiritual formation process of a believer as it fosters Christian maturity. For believers younger in the faith who are not engaged in leadership and ministry, ministry and service are important disciplines.

However, in Sri Lanka there is too much focus on how a leader is performing in ministry while neglecting to see how they are “progressing” in their personal lives. In becoming caught up in the performance of believers, no attention is given to the quality of their inner lives. This is one of the challenges of the house church model itself, where due to exponential growth and aggressive church planting, neglecting the quality of a leader’s inner life and growth unintentionally happens, as the focus on raising potential and capable leaders becomes an all-consuming affair due to the lack of leaders in the midst of a great harvest. The obvious danger is that leaders may neglect to invest in their “union with Christ” at the expense of ministering for Christ and be deceived into thinking everything is fine because the ministry performance is good.

The participants that participated in this study were heavily engaged in ministry. They were all house church leaders, some of whom were leading multiple house

churches. They were engaged in evangelism, preaching and teaching, and ministering to the needy. The pre-test quantitative scores reveal that the highest scores for all participants were for questions #15, #17, #18, #19 and #20, all of which concerned ministry. Therefore, it was not particularly surprising that the post-test results revealed that the lowest percentages of growth were also for questions #15 (3.4%), #17 (10.3%), #18 (13.6%), #19 (14.4%) and #20 (0%).

However, the Spiritual Formation Program had a significant impact on the inner spiritual and personal growth of the participants as seen in their comparative responses in the pre-test and post-test questionnaires for questions #1 through #14 as seen in Figure 4.7. These statistics are also attested by the comments of the Focus Group participants, none of whom mentioned growth in terms of ministry, evangelism, and service. Instead, their responses to spiritual growth were in the areas of being led by God (**FG5**), being able to overcome anger (**FG9**), being able to bring balance in life (**FG4**), character change (**FG1**), being able to overcome worry (**FG2**), and finding inner strength (**FG7**), inner peace (**FG3**), and inner change (**FG6**).

The result of all of the above is that prior to the Spiritual Formation Program, the participants were very strong in ministry and service but lacked a similar strength in their inner and spiritual lives. After practicing the Spiritual Formation Program, the participants displayed more holistic lives and were more balanced leaders whose inner lives were congruent with their visible ministry and service. Henry Nouwen wrote that, “Spiritual formation presents opportunities to enter into the center of our heart and become familiar with the complexities of our own inner life” (Nouwen Kindle Loc 44-45), and this idea is clearly evident with the findings of this research.

Service must flow out of a love for God and love for others. Service should flow from within as a result of the life-transforming work of the Holy Spirit. (Whitney 144 Kindle). There cannot be an over-emphasis on the performance of a leader at the neglect of inner life, for there is nothing more important than cultivating inner lives through an intimate abiding in Christ. It is through union with Christ that transformation takes place and believers connect to the source of power for their new lives (Burrige 643). The participants' growth in their inner lives over the four-week study period was a result of cultivating a deeper union with Christ through the practice of the spiritual disciplines. The more they abide, the more they will grow; the more they grow, the more their lives will begin to mirror His. Their inner lives will grow in Christ-likeness, with Christ-like compulsions, desires, aspirations, convictions, and conscience and from their innermost being will flow rivers of living water and fruit that others will be blessed by (Chan 90-91). Through their participation in the Spiritual Formation Program, participants were able to enjoy a deeper union with Christ, which resulted in inner change that would contribute to fruitful ministry. There is an intrinsic connection between fruitful ministry and union with Christ (Purves 125 Kindle). Jesus himself said, "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5), but if believers remain in Him, they will bear much fruit and whatever they ask in His Name, it shall be done (John 15:7-8). Without life in Christ, there is no ministry, (Purves 126-127 Kindle). This major finding affirms that a spiritual formation program can be used to build healthier, more holistic leaders who are growing on the inside as well as the outside and whose ministry is an outflow of inner transformation where their union with Christ defines every word spoken, every word of advice given, and every strategy developed (Nouwen Kindle Loc 285-286).

The discipline of study, meditation, and application of scripture is a practice that should be included in any spiritual formation program.

One of the most influential elements of the Spiritual Formation Program was the discipline of study, meditation, and application of scripture. The discipline was based on the *lectio divina* practice of reading scripture. Participants in the Spiritual Formation Program indicated a 44.4% growth in question #2 (I read and study my Bible daily. When the Bible exposes something in my life that needs change, I respond to make things right. The Bible influences my decisions and it reflects in my attitudes and actions in the way they read, meditated and applied scripture). The impact of this discipline was consistent across ethnicity and gender. Sinhala participants from Buddhist backgrounds indicated a 45% increase to question #2, while Tamil participants from Hindu backgrounds recorded a 42% increase. Similarly, both male and female participants indicated a growth of 44.4% in how they related to the scriptures. The significance of these figures was expressed in words by the Focus Group, where seven of the ten participants indicated that the discipline of reading, meditating, and applying the scriptures was the most influential discipline of the five they practiced.

The influence of scripture in molding and shaping the participants was a key factor to their growth during the four weeks. N. T. Wright says that “The practice of reading scripture, studying scripture, acting scripture, singing scripture—generally soaking oneself in scripture as an individual and a community—has been seen from the earliest days of Christianity as central to the formation of Christian character” (Wright 261 Kindle). These words are also echoed by Donald Whitney who writes, “no spiritual discipline is more important than the intake of God’s Word. Nothing can substitute it.

There simply is no healthy Christian life apart from a diet of the milk and meat of Scripture” (22 Kindle).

In the Old Testament, the scriptures were the benchmark for Israel’s living as the people of God. In many of the “high points” of Israel’s spiritual life, whether it be under the likes of Moses, David Samuel, Ezra, or Josiah, scripture played an influential role in shaping the lives of God’s people. Likewise, the New Testament writers placed great emphasis on the scriptures. Believers were encouraged to hold firmly to the Word, (Philippians 2: 14-16), to let the Word dwell in them richly (Colossians 3:16), to protect themselves with the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17), to humbly accept the Word and obey it (James 1:21-22), and to learn and be encouraged by the scriptures (Romans 15:4). In fact, in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul explains how scripture is breathed out by God. It is a dynamic, powerful, living, productive, and penetrating Word of God. **FG7** explained it, “as if the Bible came alive. It became a living thing. God spoke to me daily from it and it stuck in my mind and I felt compelled to change some of my ways.” Paul says four things happen as a result of this encounter with the scriptures. First, the scriptures become profitable for teaching; second it is profitable for reproof. Mulholland Jr. comments on the subject of reproof by saying that the “living Word of God penetrates to the center of our being. It discerns the thoughts and intentions of our hearts and addresses us at the points of our brokenness. We begin to see the distinction of what we are and what God is speaking us to be” (45). This is what **FG9** described in her experience with the scriptures as, “it sinks deep into you and it begins to affect your thoughts, your feelings and your ways.” She said she had heard how life-giving the scriptures were, but it was only in the four weeks of the study that she had experienced it. Third, the scriptures are profitable for

correction, the Greek term meaning “to bring something into alignment or wholeness” (Mulholland 45). **FG4** mentions something similar in his experience with the scriptures. He says, “I didn’t absorb the scriptures into my life enough and therefore application was poor. But now because of how I have been taught to read the Word I have been able to address many weaknesses and make the changes in my life so I can move forward.” Fourth, the scripture is profitable for training into righteousness. Paul goes on to explain that the purpose of all of this is so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

One of the challenges faced in training people in the context of spiritual formation is to move past reading the scriptures like a book. This is best expressed by participant **FG7** who confessed that he read it “like a story book.” The *lectio divina* practice was specifically chosen to give the participants an opportunity to relate to scripture in a deeper way, rather than simply reading the scriptures, to pray the scriptures; rather than studying scripture, to let the scriptures study them (Smith 108). It also brought greater synergy between the participants’ prayer life and scripture study. The participants were encouraged to prayerfully engage the scripture and then let the scripture inspire and inform their prayer (Smith p. 238 Kindle).

The spiritual discipline of reading, meditating and applying scripture according to the ancient *lectio divina* practice contributed greatly to the success of the Spiritual Formation Program. **FG3** commented that the Bible is a “completely new book” to her now; **FG2** said she was able to face some of the hardest challenges in her life without caving in as she would usually have done because of the way she began to truly understand the scriptures. *Lectio divina* which literally means “divine reading” has been

practiced since the early church and was introduced to the West by the desert father John Cassian early in the fifth century. It has been practiced for centuries by Cistercian monks and has recently been rediscovered in wider parts of the Christian community (Boa Kindle Lo 1730-1733). Henri Nouwen in describing the practice of *lectio divina* says it is “to read the Bible with reverence and openness to what the Spirit is saying to us in the present moment, to approach the Word of God as a word spoken directly to me, to read the scriptures ‘on my knees’—reverently, attentively, and with the deep faith that God has a word for me in my own unique situation” (Nouwen Kindle Loc 247-251). Gordon Smith sums up this practice in this way,

The contemporary practice of *lectio divina* is an essential spiritual practice for the church today as well as for every student in a theological school—the capacity to read the Scriptures in prayer with attention to grammar and exegesis but with ultimate attention to the one who is revealed through the ancient text. (Smith 238 Kindle)

As a pastor who has led a church network where 99% of believers are first generation Christians, it is the researcher’s opinion that scripture is central to spiritual formation. One of the biggest challenges churches in this environment face is that people do not read their Bibles like they should. Some people, such as those from the Tamil Tea-Estate community, of whom many, are illiterate, which compounds the problem. The Bible is not an easy read in Sinhala either, and it does not have the various versions that are available in English. Supporting resources such as encyclopedias, commentaries, and dictionaries are extremely limited. Due to these factors, there is a great struggle to relate to the scriptures. Even among the Focus Group participants, it is evident from the pre-test

questionnaire that the scriptures were not as influential as they should be for such a critical leadership group. According to the evidence presented in this research, any spiritual formation program should include the discipline of study, meditation, and application of scripture.

The disciplines of a personal rule of life and peer to peer accountability was effective in the spiritual formation program in a Sri Lankan context.

J. Oswald Sanders says in his book *Spiritual Leadership*, that “each moment of the day is a gift from God that deserves care, for by any measure, our time is short and the work is great.” (93). House church leaders are busy people and they will agree with Sanders’ statement that time is short and the work is great. They have to pastor approximately 12-20 people, have to prepare their sermons, attend to the needs of the believers, lead the church in evangelism and ministry, engage in discipleship, and train the next group of leaders. None of the leaders who were in the participant groups were serving in a “full-time” ministry capacity. They were lay ministers who had families, work, and personal lives and needs to take care of. It is understandable that time management was a serious issue in their lives. The overall average for question #9 (I have good time management. I give quality time to my family. I balance ministry with work. I know what my God given purpose is and I am giving that priority) was 2.8 out of 5. Ethnicity wise, this number did not change much (Sinhala Buddhist Test Group 2.86, Tamil Hindu Test Group 2.63, Sinhala Buddhist Control Group 3, Tamil Hindu Control Group 2.8). Gender-wise, time management was still a challenge. Both the male (2.66 Control Group and 2.76 Test Group) and the female participants (2.73 Control Group, 3.08 Test group) struggled to prioritize due to poor time management.

The Spiritual Formation Program contributed to a growth of 37.6% in this area. The Sinhala Buddhist Test Group participants especially who recorded a growth of 44.4% in this area, while the Tamil Hindu Test Group participants recorded a growth of 28%. Poor labor regulations on private Tea Estates is one of the main reasons for the difference between the two ethnic groups. Tamils working on private Tea Estates are sometimes forced to work seven days a week. In relation to gender, male participants recorded a growth of 44.9% while female participants recorded a growth of 31.16%. Overall, there was a growth of 37.6% in better management of time, and the discipline of practicing a Personal Rule of Life played an influential role in that growth.

One of the key factors to becoming a good leader is the ability to balance time and prioritize what is important. Managing others is not possible until self-management occurs (1 Timothy 3:5). Time is a leader's most precious resource and needs to be spent well (Macchia, Stephen A. 83 Kindle), because "minutes and hours wisely used translate into an abundant life" (Sanders 93). Leaders must learn to manage their time according to priorities, lead by principle, prioritize what is important, honor the right relationships, and manage time with fluidity (Thrall, Bill; McNicol Bruce; McElrath, Ken. *The Ascent of a Leader* Kindle Loc 1726, Kindle Loc 1734-1735). However, these participants seemed to struggle with the issue of balancing time and priorities. **FG 4** confessed that he was struggling to balance time between his work, family, and ministry, and invariably it was his prayer life that suffered. **FG1** also commented that she had always desired to have a deep walk with the Lord, but her life was often chaotic, and she used to neglect the disciplines mentioned in the study. **FG5** said that he struggled to balance work, ministry,

family, and political work in the community. In His words “I really needed some structure and balance in my life.”

The third major finding of this research is that a personal rule of life works as a spiritual discipline that can help leaders prioritize who and what is important to bring balance to their lives and involve God in their daily routines. A simple personal rule of life is one of the easiest and yet very meaningful disciplines for life. **FG5** expressed it this way, “the personal rule of life helped me prioritize and give attention to what mattered most”. **FG7** commented that the rule of life helped him become a more balanced person and also become a better husband and father. **FG9** experienced much change through the personal rule of life. She said that the rule of life helped her accomplish many things that she had put off for a lack of time or because other needs overwhelmed what she wanted to do. She commented “I am just so amazed at how God enabled me to accomplish all on my personal rule of life. The rule of life had a huge impact on my life. It was a source of tremendous strength.”

Leaders must be people of focus, balance, and discipline. Most often it is not the lack of time but the better use of time that is the challenge (Sanders 94). A leader’s calling and purpose can be expressed and reinforced through an intentional rule of life. A rule of life also helps integrate the various components of daily experience, from devotions to work, under the lordship of Christ (Boa Loc 4753-4757 Kindle). It is a commitment to live life in a particular way that honors God, honors personal limits, prioritizes what matters in life according to the Spirit’s leading, and keeps one disciplined and focused through life’s journey. It must be crafted prayerfully and carefully. (Macchia Kindle Loc 4754-4757)

As one who himself practices a personal rule of life and as a pastor of over 125 house church leaders of whom many struggle with balance and time management, the researcher's observation is that a personal rule of life is a discipline that can help house church leaders prioritize their daily lives based on principles and importance. Since a personal rule of life is formed and reflected in one's daily spiritual rhythms and practices, it will help house church leaders to become more balanced and also experience Christ in both the extraordinary and mundane of daily life.

Peer-to-Peer Accountability is another spiritual discipline that enriched the lives of the participants. Participant **FG6** of the Focus Group participants said it was the most impacting discipline, while **FG4, FG5, FG9, and FG10** rated it as the second most influential discipline. **FG7** also commented about accountability saying, "just knowing that you have someone else in your life who identifies with you, who understands you and hears you out is a big strength. These four weeks, I never felt alone." **FG5**, said "after being accountable with someone you feel so free. Whatever big thing that I had kept inside of me which I couldn't tell anyone else I told my partner. It is by sharing our difficulties that we are released to step out to face the next week." **FG6** commented, "by sharing and opening myself to another person, by being able to openly say, 'I did this, or I didn't do this', and to have someone to pray with me really transformed my life. I would actually wait eagerly for the day I would meet with my accountability partner. To have an open and honest relationship with an accountability partner made a huge difference in my life."

Nouwen says, "though spiritual formation is personal and inward, it is best done in a community of support" (Kindle Loc 97-98), because people are created for

relationships and need others in order to grow and become all that God intends them to be (Macchia 150-151 Kindle). In fact, most Christians become more consistent in their spiritual growth when they meet or talk regularly with someone else (Whitney 44 Kindle). There is also a growing concern in leadership thought that isolation is not healthy for spiritual growth, and the need for true community is essential for Christian leaders (Boa Kindle Loc 8342). The discipline of accountability fosters spiritual growth because it esteems the value of being in relationship with people who love us and who are willing to watch over our souls (Hebrews 13:7). Accountability partners journey together and become both companions and mentors. They help detect growth and areas to develop and help see the footprints of God in their partners (Foster 95 Kindle). As Adele A. Calhoun says, “accountability partners share the last ten percent of themselves with each other. They let their secrets out. And together they focus on living holy and responsible lives, fueled by desire for God” (123).

Sri Lanka’s traditional conservative culture is generally not conducive to genuine openness and transparency. Sri Lankans, like other Asian cultures, struggle with transparency for fear of being rejected or of being ashamed of disrespecting their leaders by not living up to standard. The discipline of peer-to-peer accountability is particularly suited to a Sri Lankan culture because, first, peer-to-peer negates the fear of disappointing one’s leaders or losing face (which is a major concern in Sri Lankan culture), and second, it is less threatening because as peers there is common purpose and similarity. Accountability is most successful if it is built on deep friendships. It must also be voluntary and not forced. The evidence of this study attests to the impact peer-to-peer accountability had on the spiritual growth of the participants. The reasons this practice of

accountability functioned well was because the participants were given the freedom to select their relative partners, and they were also encouraged to choose someone whom they were already good friends with.

Ministry Implications of the Findings

The major findings of this research highlight three significant implications. Referring to a DMin project, Tim Sensing writes that “a pastor-student is one who finds himself living and serving in the context of the research” (Sensing Kindle Loc 1744). Similarly, the researcher finds himself within these implications as well. First, a spiritual formation program is effective in strengthening Christian maturity in house church leaders and should be incorporated into house church leadership development programs as well as other spiritual leadership development programs. The lack of it is undermining the house church movement in Sri Lanka. With an over-emphasis on church planting and church growth, there is an unintentional neglect regarding the quality of leaders. Since this study has provided clear evidence that a spiritual formation program can strengthen Christian maturity in house church leaders, the first ministry implication of this project is to implement such a program and incorporate it into both formal and informal training programs. Further study should be undertaken to develop an easy to implement theoretical and practical curriculum that could be used by churches and ministry organizations to train leaders. One of the great advantages of the house church movement is its discipleship and fellowship focus. Further study can seek how to integrate a spiritual formation program into the discipleship life of the house church movement.

Second, this study has highlighted the value of growing in spiritual maturity through the scriptures. The ministry implication of this urges pastors to teach their

disciples and potential leaders how to properly relate to the scriptures and to help them find their spiritual nourishment from the Word of God. The *lectio divina* practice used in this study showed the impact scripture had on the house church leaders. It is not that they were not reading their Bibles prior to the test but that the way they were reading it was of little value because it was not shaping and changing them. The *lectio divina* practice exposed them to a way of reading that involved more than just reading chapter after chapter. The reading, meditating, reflecting, internalizing, and applying process had a significant impact on their Christian maturity. It shaped them as believers, influenced change, gave them strength to deal with the pressures of this world, and, it is safe to assume, made them better leaders.

This ministry implication should also be an encouragement to pastors, disciple makers, and leaders of movements such as the house church movement. It is important that leaders mentor other leaders in how to handle the scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15) and find nourishment through them. Furthermore, as house church leaders, who are entrusted with teaching and preaching scripture, it is of paramount importance that the scriptures are alive and active in their lives. Also important is the fact that 99% of the congregation in these house churches are first-generation Christians, who need to find the source of life, the scriptures. If leaders are struggling with the scriptures, then the believers will have little hope. God speaks through His Word, and His people need to be equipped to receive, understand, internalize, and apply what God is saying. Therefore, this is a vital ministry implication; that scripture is at the core of the spiritual lives of not just leaders but all believers.

The third implication of this study flows out from the impact the practices of a personal rule of life and peer-to-peer accountability had on the participants. A personal rule of life is a simple, easy to create and implement discipline, but it can be a powerful tool of change if adhered to. The personal rule of life implemented for this study was a simple seven-point rule that focused on spiritual, personal, family, ministry, and social priorities, but it became an influential tool for change. Every person in this world follows some rule of life. Some may be unwritten or followed unknowingly, while some others may have great clarity. One of the greatest challenges leaders, especially lay-leaders, face in their consistency and endurance in ministry is the ability to balance the various priorities of life. House church leaders face these challenges even more so as they are essentially “mini-pastors” but also have professions, families, and other pressing issues they have to juggle. Crafting a rule of life is a great way to prioritize and align day-to-day life under the influence of the Holy Spirit. A personal rule of life is a simple and easy to implement discipline with the potential for great results.

Coupling a rule of life with peer-to-peer accountability enhances the impact of both disciplines. This was evident from the study. Peer-to-peer accountability was rated as the second most influential discipline practiced by the Focus Group. Yet, as mentioned previously, Sri Lanka’s traditionally conservative culture is strongly influenced by Asia’s shame-based culture, where one has serious concern for what others think (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/overcoming-the-culture-of-shame/>). This is one of the reasons why Sri Lanka has one of the highest suicide rates in the world (<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-most-suicides-in-the-world.html>). A lack of grace, fear, mistrust, unhealthy relationships, and uncondusive

leadership environments can make genuine accountability a difficult process. However, this research study showed that if done properly, it is a potent weapon for change and a blessing to leaders. All of these factors contribute to the fact that this would be an avenue to further explore and study. A lack of transparency and accountability has contributed to much of the leadership crisis in the modern world. It would be prudent for Christian leadership not to follow suit.

Limitations of the Study

The biggest limitation of this research was researcher bias. First, I personally believe in the house church movement, and I also lead a church consisting of over a hundred house churches. I have witnessed its potential as a church movement, and I have also seen its weakness when leaders of the movement put all their effort in tangible results and focus on numerical growth at the expense of their spiritual development process. I have a personal stake in this research. I would desire it to be successful and effective because I do believe a spiritual formation program is the answer to some of the serious flaws in the Sri Lankan house church movement. Second, the participants knew who I was and my role in the movement in some capacity. I did my utmost to remain as objective as possible. I had an independent moderator facilitate the Focus Group conversations; I went to great extents to ensure that I was unaware of the participants' identity when it came to filling the pre-test and post-test questionnaires. I removed myself from any process that would compromise the purity of the data required for this research. I did my utmost to be as objective as possible and let the research evidence determine the findings and guide the study.

A second limitation was the fact that this study was undertaken in multiple languages and not just in English. It was quite challenging to explain western phrasing such as “spiritual formation” and “rule of life” to audiences that have never heard of them before and in languages that do not have translated definitions. Therefore, the researcher’s own translated definitions were the only definitions available. The lack of resources in the languages of Sinhala and Tamil highlights this challenge. There was not one book resource in Sinhala or Tamil available that addressed the topics of spiritual formation, rule of life, and other relevant concepts. On one hand, the lack of information created a unique opportunity to present a study that the participants had not been exposed to, but, on the other hand, multiple languages and the lack of proper definitions and resources was a limitation. These limitations were addressed by speaking to some of the finest translators in Sri Lanka to form working definitions. The researcher also sat down with the Tamil translator and the Focus Group moderator to discuss the study. Though English is his preferred language, he is fluent and preach in Sinhalese; therefore, he was able to communicate the study effectively. However, anyone wanting to undertake a study of this nature in similar settings will need to be aware of this limitation.

A third limitation was the traditional Sri Lankan conservative culture where the study was implemented. One of the difficult things to get Sri Lankan leaders to do is to open up and be transparent about their lives. It takes great effort and a lot of trust for a leader to reveal a personal weakness to the pastor whom he honors. In order to foster genuine accountability and transparency, the study went to great lengths to ensure the confidentiality of each participant. Second, the researcher took much effort to verbally and non-verbally communicate to the participants that he was completely unaware which

questionnaire was whose. These factors helped create an environment conducive to honesty and transparency. Anyone who desires to conduct a similar research such as this in a similar setting would need to be aware of this.

Unexpected Observations

Women make up over 65% of my church leadership. This is pretty much the status quo with the churches that participated in this program, and it is common among the Sri Lankan churches in general. Women are more receptive to the gospel and display greater commitment than their male counterparts. They are the ones I, as a pastor, often turn to for ministry initiatives, as the men in the church I lead struggle with the distraction of their day-to-day jobs. The assumption was that this program would be most effective with the female participants. The impact the Spiritual Formation Program had on the male participants was unexpected and surprising.

Another unexpected observation was that the Control Group, who did not participate in the Spiritual Formation Program, also indicated an increase in the level of Christian maturity after four weeks, albeit a very marginal level that was not significant enough to compromise the study in any way. However, this growth was unexpected, as the assumption was that their level of Christian maturity would be the same after four weeks. As mentioned, this growth did not compromise the study in any way due to the very marginal increase, as well as the significant rise in Christian maturity among the Test Group participants, yet this was an unexpected observation. Since the preliminary pre-test literature such as the consent forms, confidentiality agreements, and particularly the pre-test questionnaires contain information about the content of the study, the question arises whether this information influenced the Control Group participants to

give some attention to their spiritual growth and thus encourage the participants to genuinely try to grow spiritually on their own during the four-week period, or did their local church leadership development and discipleship programs contribute in some way to the participants' spiritual progress? These were interesting questions that arose from this unexpected observation.

Recommendations

The research project provided answers to many of the study initial questions, but at the same time, it presented more questions for future research. First, I am particularly interested to see how pastors can form and implement an intentional systematic spiritual formation program for believers from the time of their conversion experience. What would a program like that look like? What would the ingredients be? How can the current Sunday school, small group, and Christian education curriculums combine with the variety of available spiritual disciplines to form an intentional and systematic spiritual formation program to influence spiritual growth in the average believers in our churches? This research will be of great benefit not only to pastors and church leaders in Sri Lanka, but around the world. Second, another question that rose from the research concerns the many other spiritual disciplines that the likes of Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Donald Whitney, and Kenneth Boar mention. Are there other disciplines that would be more effective than the ones chosen for the study? Are there specific combinations of certain disciplines that have a more pronounced effect based on one's current spiritual state or ethnic, religious or social, background? Third, it would be interesting to see if the results of this test would be different in a study undertaken over a different time span. The four-week time span of this study was ideal to maintain momentum, intensity, and

commitment. Would the findings be different in a six-month, one-year, or three-year study? These questions could be catalysts for further research.

Postscript

As the researcher, and as a leader within this community, I have gained more from this research experience than I could have ever imagined. I was overjoyed when listening to the powerful stories of change the Focus Group interviews revealed. It inspires me to take this study and do more with it across this beautiful island nation and beyond, where the church is growing in an unprecedented way and first-generation Christians comprise the majority of the congregations. In fact, I would almost say it is a primary focus of ministry after the completion of this research. I have also been blessed immensely by the discipline that was required to undertake this research project. Working through each of the areas of this project has strengthened my general ability to focus and work towards a goal no matter how hard it was at times.

This journey began when I began searching for answers to strengthen Christian maturity in the growing churches that I was leading. I was given a God-given vision to plant churches across villages where people had not had a decent presentation of the gospel, but after a couple of years of just planting churches, I was equally challenged by how I should lead them to Christ-likeness after they had come to faith in Christ. In this crucial period of my ministry, I was given the privilege of studying at Asbury Theological Seminary, and it was at ATS that I was exposed to the rich themes of spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines and their vital link to Christian maturity. I realized I was practicing many of these disciplines in my life but had not begun practicing them with an intentional focus on spiritual formation to develop great Christian

maturity in my life. A year into my study, I felt burdened to undertake a research project to determine whether the practice of such a program would benefit house church leaders in Sri Lanka. The research proved conclusively so. In this sense, my journey is complete, but my ministry in this field may be just beginning. May I be faithful.

APPENDIX A
LETTER TO SENIOR PASTORS OF ASSEMBLY OF GOD MATUGAMA,
GALLE & PUWAKPITIYA

Ref: Permission to conduct research study with your house church leaders.

Dear Reverend _____

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study with a group of house church leaders from your esteemed church. The research I will be conducting is for the Doctor of Ministry program that I am currently enrolled in at Asbury Theological Seminary, Lexington, USA. I am researching the impact a spiritual formation program will have in strengthening Christian maturity in house church leaders in Sri Lanka. Your churches are pioneers of the house church movement in our country and I believe that not only will your leaders be ideal participants, but the study itself will be beneficial to your churches in light of our work in Sri Lanka. There are specific criteria in selecting the suitable candidates and I look forward to your assistance in selecting them. These criteria include that

1. they are first generation Christians who have been Christians for a minimum of three years;
2. they are serving as house church leaders for more than one year;
3. they are between the ages of 21 – 45.

The identity of the participants will be kept completely confidential and after the successful completion of this study, all data collected will be destroyed within twelve months.

Your approval to allow me to conduct this research with your leaders will be greatly appreciated. For any further clarification, you may contact me on lohan.bibile@asburyseminary.edu

If you are willing to give your consent to this study, please be kind enough to sign below and post it to me in the self-addressed envelope.

Yours Faithfully,

Lohan Bibile

I have read this letter and hereby give my approval to Rev. Lohan Bibile to conduct this research with my house church leaders.

Printed Name

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH Participation/Assistant CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

NT

A Spiritual Formation Program to strengthen Christian Maturity in Sri Lankan House Church Leaders

I, _____, agree to assist the primary investigator with this research study. I agree to maintain full confidentiality when performing these tasks. I specifically agree to the following:

1. keep all research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the primary investigator;
2. hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be revealed during the course of performing the research tasks;
3. not make copies of any raw data in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts), unless specifically requested to do so by the primary investigator;
4. keep all raw data that contains identifying information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession;
5. give all raw data in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the primary investigator when I have completed the research task.

Printed name of Participant /Assistant _____

Address: _____

Telephone number: _____ Email: _____

Signature of research participant/assistant _____ Date _____

Printed name of primary investigator _____

Signature of primary investigator _____ Date _____

APPENDIX E

CHRISTIAN MATURITY QUESTIONNAIRE

APPLICANT: _____ DATE: _____

Please complete the following assessment carefully and prayerfully. Be truthful and honest. Your answers are completely confidential. Use the scale below to respond to each question.

NEVER – 1 RARELY – 2 OCCASIONALLY – 3 REGULARLY – 4 ALWAYS – 5

	QUESTION	RESPONSE
1	I practice a regular quiet time to pray and commune with Christ. My devotional life is exciting and I sense God's Presence with me. I look forward to spending this time with Christ and I maintain an attitude of prayer throughout the day	
2	I read and study my Bible daily. When the Bible exposes something in my life that needs change, I respond to make things right. The Bible influences my decisions and it reflects in my attitudes and actions	
3	When I look back at my life till a month ago, I can say that I have grown in my walk with the Lord over the last 4 weeks	
4	Peace, contentment, hope and joy characterize my life rather than worry, fear and anxiety.	
5	Throughout the day I am conscious of the Spirit's leading and I follow His leading. I am sensitive to His voice. I trust Him to help me in every situation.	
6	I know who I am in Christ. I am secure in my identity in Christ. No matter what happens or who says what about me, I trust my Lord and I am confident in Him.	
7	I am self-controlled. I am conscious about my actions, words and behavior. I am always aware that how I live influences what people think of God and how people	

	QUESTION	RESPONSE
9	I have good time management. I give quality time to my family. I balance ministry with work. I know what my God given purpose is and I am giving that priority.	
10	My relationships with people are healthy. I am able to love people and genuinely care for them. I forgive people who hurt me. I am always willing to say sorry when I am in the wrong.	
11	I am open to correction and willing to learn. I don't get hurt or take it personally when people speak into my life or give me constructive criticism.	
12	My neighbors and friends will attest to my testimony. They will testify that my life matches what I say.	
13	I speak the truth at all times. I try to be honest. Integrity is important to me. Generally, my private life is the same as my public life.	
14	I have victory over my thought life. The Spirit helps me overcome wrong attitudes, lust and negative feelings.	
15	I use my gifts to strengthen my local church. I give of my time and talent to build God's Kingdom.	
16	I am a generous person. I tithe and give regularly to the Kingdom of God through my local church. I am always willing to give more than I receive.	
17	Ministry is important to me. I am willing to serve others without expecting anything in return. I go out of my way to show love to others	
18	I am currently being disciplined. I am open to other Christians holding me accountable for my spiritual growth.	
19	I share the gospel with non-believers weekly. I am passionate about the lost. My family, friends and neighbors have heard my testimony	
20	I believe that the Great Commission is a mandate to be obeyed. I am currently discipling a group of believers to greater spiritual maturity.	
	view me as a Christian.	

APPENDIX F

**A SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAM TO STRENGTHEN CHRISTIAN
MATURITY IN SRI LANKAN HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS**

SEMINAR OUTLINE

Introduction

- Why we are here
- What this research is about
- The opportunities we face in our country to spread the gospel and build God's Kingdom
- The call for us to be good people who carry the good news (1 Thessalonians 1:5-6)

What is Christian Maturity

- To be made into the image and likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29)
- To be made perfected (Telios) (Hebrews 6:1 / Colos 1:28)
- To reflect God and through our living show people around us who God is and what He is like
- He in us and we in Him (John 15)
- The assumption that we grow from spiritual babies to spiritual adults
- The growth never ends this side of eternity and it is a daily activity
- We are created and formed (Ephesians 2:10)

What is Spiritual Formation

- A set of disciplines to develop and strengthen Christian maturity
- Holy Spirit empowered changing, shaping and living.
- There are many spiritual disciplines – we will focus on 5
- Prayer
- The reading of scripture to shapes our lives
- Fasting
- Living to a personal rule of life
- Growing in community through weekly accountability

Summary

- Making your personal rule of life
- Assigning accountability partners

- The next 4 weeks
- Until we meet again
- Let us pray...

APPENDIX G

**A SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAM TO STRENGTHEN CHRISTIAN MATURITY
IN SRI LANKAN HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS**

YOUR PERSONAL RULE OF LIFE

For the purpose of this study, a personal rule of life is a set of seven resolutions that you are committing to honor and live by during the period of this research. Please prayerfully and thoughtfully write down your personal rule of life below.

1. Rule #1 Concerning your personal life

2. Rule #2 Concerning your personal life

3. Rule #3 Concerning your personal life

4. Rule #4 Concerning your marriage / family

5. Rule #5 Concerning your church and ministry

6. Rule #6 Concerning your place of work

7. Rule #7 Concerning your relationship with society

Printed Name

Signature

Date

APPENDIX H

A SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAM TO STRENGTHEN CHRISTIAN MATURITY IN SRI LANKAN HOUSE CHURCH LEADERS

PEER TO PEER ACCOUNTABILITY GUIDELINE

Dear Participant,

Once a week you and your accountability partner will spend 30 – 60 minutes sharing and praying for each other. The following questions serve as a guideline for your time together.

1. Have you spent time in prayer this week as detailed to us in the spiritual formation program?
2. Have you read your Bible daily?
3. Did you fast this week? When?
4. Have you been able to live according to your personal rule of life? Please take time to discuss.
5. Have you compromised your integrity in any way?
6. How has your thought life been?
7. Have you shared your faith with anyone this week? Please share details
8. Have you been a good neighbor to the people in your life? Have you been able to forgive anyone who has offended you?
9. Are you going through any struggle that we can pray for together?
10. Have you been truthful in all that you have shared with me today?

Appendix I

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Question 1: Reflecting over the last four weeks, would you share how you have grown in Christian maturity?

Question 2: How did the spiritual formation program strengthen Christian maturity in
your life?

Question 3: What were the two most effective elements in the spiritual formation program?

Question 4: Did you face any challenges that negatively affected your commitment to the spiritual formation program?

Question 5: Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion?

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