

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Unlearning is a term used in several academic fields, principally in psychology and education. It refers to the act of unlearning prior knowledge in order to gain new information. An art professor from Falmouth University uses the term “willed forgetfulness” to describe the unlearning process because of the implication required that one must choose to approach, receive and build upon new knowledge differently.¹

Few people, however, are aware of this theory and its implications for individual and corporate growth. Brian L. Delahaye, a scholar in human resource development, points out the recent popularity of the unlearning theory. He comments,

It is interesting to reflect that the concept of unlearning only recently has become a phenomenon worthy of consideration in adult and organizational learning. Centuries ago, an individual’s knowledge would last a lifetime, indeed knowledge would be passed down generations and still be highly useful. This has changed during this century until, as we pass into the new millennium, knowledge becomes rapidly obsolete – hence the need to consider the unlearning process. Surprisingly, there has been very little written on the topic.²

While Delahaye makes an accurate observation as to the scarcity of resources regarding the unlearning theory, the need to unlearn has never been absent. Guarding former knowledge and tradition often play a role in hindering people from maturing and

¹ John Baldacchino, “Willed Forgetfulness: The Arts, Education and the Case for Unlearning,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32, no. 4 (July 2013): 415, accessed November 27, 2020, <http://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/docview/1357221660?accountid=202487>.

² Karen Winderknecht and Brian Delahaye, “A Model of Individual and Organisational Unlearning,” (proceedings of the 18th Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management, University of Sydney, 2004), accessed November 6, 2020, <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/1740/1/1740.pdf>.

receiving new knowledge. This can also pertain to Christians receiving revelation from God whether through Scripture or information spoken and revealed by the Spirit of God through other means. Erroneous teaching and interpretation regarding prophecy, for example, is knowledge that needs to be unlearned in order for Christians to apply and utilize this gift today.

When Jesus taught on the earth, He criticized the Jews for holding strictly to their traditions to the point of not being open to receiving the new commandments of God, even the new Kingdom Jesus brought (Mark 7:5–13).³ When Christians are unwilling or resist this kind of transformation, corporate growth and individual maturity is compromised. The evaluation and application of the educational and organizational theory of unlearning will be used in this paper to validate the Christian's ability to acquire new knowledge of Christian traditions and biblical gifts to effectively engage in prophesying and become more disciplined in reading the Scriptures and praying.

What Is Unlearning?

The following are a few important definitions of the unlearning theory found in literature. A Swedish professor in business administration, Bo Hedberg, writes in his book, *How Organizations Learn and Unlearn*,

Knowledge grows, and simultaneously it becomes obsolete as reality changes. Understanding involves both learning new knowledge and discarding obsolete

³ New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). All Scripture verses in this paper are quoted from NRSV unless noted otherwise.

and misleading knowledge. The discarding activity – unlearning – is as important a part of understanding as is adding new knowledge.⁴

Author John W. Newstrom defines unlearning as something similar to discarding. In his article, “The Management of Unlearning: Exploding the ‘Clean Slate’ Fallacy,” Newstrom says unlearning is “the process of reducing or eliminating preexisting knowledge or habits that would otherwise represent formidable barriers to new learning.”⁵ Coimbatore Krishnarao Prahalad and Richard A. Bettis, professors at Corporate Strategy, also state something similar. In their context, they believe unlearning is simply “the process by which firms eliminate old logics and behaviors and make room for new ones.”⁶ Lastly, an organizational scientist, William Haynes Starbuck, writes that unlearning is “a process that shows people they should no longer rely on their current beliefs and methods.”⁷

All these examples from professionals in the fields of business, science and education agree that learning new things requires recycling old information that may no longer be advantageous or relevant to the current standard or way of doing things. Interestingly, each definition above also describes unlearning as a process. This is

⁴ Bo Hedberg, “How Organizations Learn and Unlearn,” in *Handbook of Organizational Design: Adapting Organizations to Their Environment*, vol. 1, eds. Paul C. Nystrom and William H. Starbuck (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1981), 3.

⁵ John W. Newstrom, “The Management of Unlearning: Exploding the “Clean Slate” Fallacy,” *Training and Development Journal* 37, no. 8 (August 1983): 36, accessed November 6, 2020, <https://www.td.org/magazines/td-archive/1983/the-management-of-unlearning-exploding-the-clean-slate-fallacy>.

⁶ Coimbatore Krishnarao Prahalad and Richard A. Bettis, “The Dominant Logic: A New Linkage Between Diversity and Performance,” *Strategic Management Journal* 7, no. 6 (November/December 1986): 485, accessed November 6, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2486135?seq=1>.

⁷ William Haynes Starbuck, “Unlearning Ineffective or Obsolete Technologies,” *International Journal of Technology Management* 11, no. 7, 8 (1996): 725, accessed November 6, 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228141359_Unlearning_Ineffective_or_Obsolete_Technologies.

important to keep in mind so that one does not assume that unlearning is an automatic and instant change.

Alvin Toffler, an American writer and futurist, stresses the importance of the unlearning process by quoting an analogy comparing the unlearned with the truly illiterate. He quotes psychologist Herbert Gerjuoy in his book, *Future Shock*: “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”⁸ Toffler’s book sold more than six million copies and was translated into many languages.

Njoke Thomas from Case Western Reserve University writes regarding unlearning as a valid corporate and individual practice. In her article, “Towards a New Definition of Unlearning: Rethinking Individual Level Unlearning and Its Implications for Practice Change,” she says, “The concept of unlearning has emerged as a potential explanation for cognitive challenges associated with relinquishing outdated practices. Though introduced as both an individual level and organization level construct, far greater attention has been paid to the organizational level construct with little appraisal of the validity of individual unlearning.”⁹ Thomas makes a critical point advantageous to this paper: there is validity in the unlearning process as it pertains to individual learning. That is, it is not just for giant organizations and hierarchal structures.

Furthermore, contrary to what Newstrom, Prahalad and Bettis think, authors Nancy Michael and Ben Wilson do not think unlearning is simply forgetting old

⁸ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1970), 367.

⁹ Njoke Thomas, “Towards a new definition of unlearning: rethinking individual level unlearning and its implications for practice change,” (thesis, Case Western Reserve University, 2011), 3, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://weatherhead.case.edu/departments/organizational-behavior/workingPapers/WP-11-01.pdf>.

knowledge. They say, “Unlearning is neither forgetting nor removing old information, experiences, or ways of thinking; instead, it is building new patterns of synaptic communication that can support different ways of thinking.”¹⁰

Nancy Michael is a professor of Neuroscience at the University of Notre Dame, and Ben Wilson is the Director of the Summer Service Learning Program at Notre Dame’s Center for Social Concerns. They teamed up to author the article, “Unlearning is the New Learning: A Neuroscientific and Theological Case for How and Why to See the World Differently.” They discuss the implications of unlearning and consider the process of unlearning to be much more difficult than learning. They write,

Learning, as it turns out, was the easy part. Anyone who has observed a young child mimic the behavior of others knows how naturally children learn from their environment. Unlearning, on the other hand, takes maturity, discipline, and equal parts courage and humility. Unlearning, as discussed here, requires conscious effort to reflect on past learning to create the possibility of new future learning that goes beyond our passively formulated, yet operative, mental constructs that undergird how we understand the world and the people around us. Unlearning is the imperative of a maturing mind which recognizes the perennial importance of seeing things rightly. If unlearning is the new learning, so to speak, how does one go about unlearning and what difference does it make?¹¹

To explain their point, Michael and Wilson refer to a bike riding experiment performed by an American engineer, Destin Sandlin. Sandlin posted videos on YouTube of his own unlearning and relearning process of riding a modified bicycle. Riding a bike is an easy task for the one who has already mastered it, but Sandler made some purposeful changes: “the direction of a bicycle’s handlebars were reversed so that turning

¹⁰ Nancy Michael and Ben Wilson, “Unlearning Is the New Learning: A Neuroscientific and Theological Case for How and Why to See the World Differently,” *University of Notre Dame Church Life Journal*, August 23, 2018, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/unlearning-is-the-new-learning-a-neuroscientific-and-theological-case-for-how-and-why-to-see-the-world-differently/>.

¹¹ Michael, “Unlearning Is the New Learning.”

the handlebars to the left would steer the bike to the right and vice versa.”¹² It took Sandlin eight months of daily practice to master riding this special bike. When he offered a 200-dollar prize to anyone who could ride this bike for ten feet without falling or using their feet for support, no one could do it. He offered this prize to several people on different occasions and not a single person could complete the task.¹³

Sandlin’s point was to prove that our brains are programmed with the knowledge we have acquired and this knowledge or understanding affects one’s ability to learn or perform a new task or action. Sandlin, as an adult, had to retrain his brain according to a new bike model in order to ride it. However, for his six-year-old son who had been riding a normal bike for just three years, it only took him two weeks to adapt to the updated version. This has a lot to do with the neuroplasticity of the brain and the pathways of learning that become concrete with prolonged patterns of behavior. It is true that it is much easier for a child to learn, relearn and unlearn things.

Once Sandlin became accustomed to riding this new bike, he found himself unable to ride a normal bike for quite a while. On one attempt, it took him twenty minutes to become adapted and people on the street around him thought he was pretending that he did not know how to ride a bike. Michael and Wilson comment,

Destin’s bike experiment suggests a maladaptive aspect of our mental tenacity for holding onto learned ways of thinking. If it is that difficult to unlearn a particular way of riding a bike, consider the implications of any misinformation we may have “learned” about other human beings: for instance, how we feel about

¹² Michael, “Unlearning Is the New Learning.”

¹³ Destin Sandlin, “The Backwards Brain Bicycle - Smarter Every Day 133,” (YouTube video), *SmarterEveryDay*, April 24, 2015, accessed November 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFzDaBzBIL0&feature=emb_logo.

strangers, or people from countries other than our own, or people whose skin is a different color than ours, or people who sleep on park benches.¹⁴

Michael and Wilson's statement is intriguing. It highlights the fact that a healthy human brain always has the capacity to learn something new, a God-given gift. It also shows that held beliefs or individual experiences can impede the process of learning and lead to making incorrect judgments or interpretations. This bike experiment vividly shows how important the process of unlearning is. It also inadvertently demonstrates that one's choice to unlearn and relearn will affect one's ability to acquire new habits or information. In the same way, Christians may choose to relearn how to live their life after receiving Christ. They may choose to become transformed according to the model of God's Kingdom. Although this is not an easy task, Sandlin and even biblical characters' experiences demonstrate that it is possible.

Unlearning Theory Applied in the Christian Context

While unlearning is often used in human resource domains to train employees to receive new knowledge or in the psychology field to change a person's mindset or behaviors, it is not limited to these. Unlearning serves secular fields well, but it can be applied to the religious field too. The Apostle Paul instructs believers in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Paul understood that when an identity shift takes place, there must also be a subsequent alteration in one's perspective, attitude and behavior.

¹⁴ Michael, "Unlearning Is the New Learning."

A good example of this unlearning is the Christian concept of repentance. John the Baptist commanded the Jews to repent (Matt. 3:2). The word “repent” in Greek is *metanoēō* and its meaning is “to repent, to change any or all of the elements composing one’s life: attitude, thoughts, and behaviors concerning the demands of God for right living.”¹⁵ According to the Recovery Version Bible used in the Local Church Movement, the footnote for the word repent states, “to repent is to have a change of mind issuing in regret, to have a turn in purpose.”¹⁶ In other words, if you only regret something but continue doing it, it is not true repentance.

True repentance involves both regret and change of mind. Michael and Wilson explain this process in their article. They say,

Some observations from theology can further supplement the case from neuroscience for the importance of unlearning. Robert Barron suggests the Greek term *metanoēō*, which is related to the terms for conversion and repentance, is best translated as “to go beyond the mind that you have.”¹⁷ Whereas the term “conversion” has come to connote an extrinsic change in one’s religious affiliation, *metanoia* refers to a reconfiguration and transformation of one’s very mind, and thus is something of a theological cognate to the neuroscientific process we’ve been describing as unlearning.¹⁸

We can apply this experience to others area beyond repentance. Within certain denominations, the traditions of men and religion are passed down by leaders and spiritual fathers, and adherents receive them without considering their origin or validity. Often persons do not engage with what they are being taught to the level of comparing it

¹⁵ *Stepbible.org*, s.v. “repent,” accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=Matt.3&options=VNHUG>.

¹⁶ Recovery Version Bible (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry), 2003.

¹⁷ Robert Barron, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1998), 4.

¹⁸ Michael, *Unlearning Is the New Learning.*”

with prior knowledge and discarding what no longer serves them as Truth. This is not to say that the Word of God should be rewritten or recycled but teaching and tradition should be evaluated and tested. When tradition is not tested against sound biblical teaching and interpretation, Christians may only boast to a one-time conversion experience and remain unknowingly resisting subsequent and necessary metanoete and unlearning experiences comparable to Paul's instruction of being transformed and renewed continually.

Another example is an unbeliever who joins a church service. This person may have a conversion experience upon hearing new information. However, this external change, although internal as well, is not the same as experiencing "metanoia" which would be the process of embracing more complex internal mental shifts that occur as a result of walking in relationship with God and being transformed by the Word of God and through experiences with the Holy Spirit. For new growth to occur, Christians will have to embrace the unlearning process continually which includes being open to new information or reinterpretations of formerly misunderstood concepts or ways of life and be open to metanoete experiences.

Michael and Wilson also describe Paul's life as a notable example of unlearning. Paul was a fervent Jew taught by Gamaliel. Although Paul persecuted Christians, he met Jesus on his way to Damascus. His dramatic conversion was a process of unlearning. At his defense before King Agrippa, Paul even says, "Indeed, I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). Paul had been convinced that his former way was accurate to Truth, and it took Jesus' appearance in the form of a dazzling light to begin the process of unlearning his behavior and old

knowledge. Essentially, Paul became blind until healed by the Holy Spirit through Ananias; then his eyes were opened. It was at this point that he began to see Jesus Christ differently. Paul went from utter blindness into a brand-new perspective, and his behaviors followed. He went from being a murderer to a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is truly an example of the unlearning and relearning experience!

Paul was certainly not the only case. The Bible is full of stories like this. Ananias had to unlearn his previous knowledge about Paul. When the Lord asked him to lay hands on Paul, he initially refused because he had heard about Paul's evil acts toward Christians. It was not until Jesus assured Ananias that Paul was a special vessel chosen for God's glory, that Ananias conceded and went to lay hands on him (Acts 9:10-17).

Perhaps miraculous experiences like these help to unlearn patterns of thought or behavior quicker than by other means. However, it is important to recall that some scholars think it may have taken Paul up to fourteen years to unlearn his old way of life and relearn and prepare himself for ministry. That is, Paul likely relearned life for at least three years up to the fourteen years that existed between his conversion and his second trip to Jerusalem with Barnabas (Gal. 2:1). Robert Charles Sproul writes in his article, "The Preparation of Paul":

Paul said that when Christ called him, he did not go to Jerusalem to receive instruction from the apostles. Rather, he retired into Arabia for a time and not until three years later did he go to Jerusalem. Even then, the only apostle he met was Peter, and the only other leader he met was James, the presiding elder of the Jerusalem church. It has often been remarked that Paul clearly implied that he spent three years being taught by Jesus Himself (1:12), either directly or (perhaps more likely) through the study of the Word. Thus, like the other apostles, Paul studied with Christ for three years before beginning his ministry (compare Acts 1:21).¹⁹

¹⁹ Robert Charles Sproul, "The Preparation of Paul," Ligonier Ministries, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/the-preparation-of-paul/>.

Preacher S. Lewis Johnson expands further on Paul's preparation time in a sermon. He writes,

Paul's seven or eight years or more, how long they were we're not absolutely certain, but they were a good many years, may have had some connection with the discipline of God that the Lord wanted to put him, who is to be the great apostle of the Gentiles through.²⁰

Whether it took three, eight or fourteen years, Paul chose to embrace the process of unlearning so much that it transformed him into one of the most famous people in history.

Peter is another example of someone who embraced the unlearning process. In Acts 10, Peter received a vision of a sheet containing all kinds of animals including mammals, birds and reptiles. He heard a voice commanding him to eat. Shocked, Peter initially rejected the idea because it did not align with his former way of life. Jewish dietary laws would never consider such a thing. God cleared up Peter's confusion by explaining a new order for the human diet: all animals were declared kosher. More importantly, God used this vision to change Peter's mind to align with God's decision about who was eligible to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Peter eventually chose to accept his new commission to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles thereby unlearning his former conviction and understanding of God. He was also then able to testify to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that God extended salvation to the Gentiles (Acts 10:18). Peter certainly experienced some unlearning as he made the transition from his former traditions to receive God's sovereign mandates. In another instance, the Pharisees were invited several times into the unlearning process. Jesus

²⁰ S. Lewis Johnson, "The Worker Awaiting the Work," (transcript, Believers Chapel, 2008), accessed November 19, 2020, https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/sljinstitute-production/topical_studies/great_lion_of_God/07_SLJ_Great_Lion_of_God.pdf.

rebuked them repeatedly for holding onto their traditions but nullifying the Word of God (Mark 7:13). Unfortunately, these “separate ones” separated themselves so much that they could no longer identify with the true Christ and his teachings.²¹ Until today, there are still many Jews who are not willing to unlearn their traditions to accept Jesus as their Messiah.

The more pertinent example related to this project is connected to 1 Corinthians 13:10. Many Evangelical Christians have been and still are taught that prophecy and other gifts of the Spirit are not available for use today. Yet, the Bible does encourage their use today and even calls it profitable. Since such believers often do not have firsthand experiences with prophesying or the other gifts, this reinforces their prior beliefs. The deception and former way of thinking is further fortified when these persons receive reports of erroneous and unfulfilled prophecies or hear of the immaturity of other believers who practice prophecy. For this to change, these Christians will have to be willing to engage in an unlearning process to reset their beliefs according to biblical truth. This may require a humble and courageous attitude, a supernatural experience and or hearing and receiving new teaching from other theologians, teachers and pastors.

Dr. Nick Gough wrote a thesis titled, “Postmodern Apologetics: A Charismatic Discipleship Program for Postmodern Missionaries.” In this, Gough points out the importance of unlearning and relearning as YWAM students embrace the power of evangelizing according to a charismatic, New Testament model of evangelism. He says,

To use a traditional apologetic limits one in bringing a person to Christ. There is a culture shift. The use of traditional methods of evangelism is ineffective today. To give an example, a young adult of this author’s acquaintance traveled overseas

²¹ Stepbible, s.v. “farisaios,” accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|strong=G5330&options=N VHUG>.

with a well-known campus group. They used a traditional form of evangelism, a type of survey questionnaire that they administered to over five thousand college students in Australia. The intent of this survey was to lead students to Christ. Out of the five thousand surveys, there is no conversion. By way of contrast, this author trained a group of YWAM students who went to Germany to evangelize immigrant Muslims. In four weeks, that group led over five hundred people to the Lord. What is the difference? The group in Germany had divine encounters while praying for the sick and operating in the prophetic. This is an example of a modernist model versus Jesus' charismata model.²²

To be able to minister the Gospel this way requires a complete rewiring because no one lives or is taught to communicate with people in supernatural ways. These students had to relearn life according to an awareness of the supernatural power available to them through Jesus Christ—all Christians do! Perhaps the most radical process of unlearning is the one a true follower of Jesus Christ must go through!

Unlearning in Society and the Prophetic Church

Declining attendance and membership are common concerns for church leaders in the US, and their concern is real. Jeffery M. Jones, a Gallup senior editor, writes in a 2019 article, “U.S. church membership was 70% or higher from 1937 through 1976, falling modestly to an average of 68% in the 1970s through the 1990s. The past 20 years have seen an acceleration in the drop-off, with a 20-percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade.”²³

According to a report done in 2018 and 2019 by Pew Research Center, “65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down

²² Dr. Nick Gough, “Postmodern Apologetics: A Charismatic Discipleship Program for Postmodern Missionaries,” (DMin. Thesis, United Theological Seminary, 2013), 10-11.

²³ Jeffery M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades,” Gallup, April 18, 2019, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx>.

12 percentage points over the past decade.”²⁴ However, in the last 100 years, the Pentecostal church has seen tremendous growth. David Masci, a former senior writer focusing on religion at Pew Research Center, authored an article in 2014 titled, “Why Has Pentecostalism Grown So Dramatically in Latin America?” In it, he explains, “With nearly 300 million followers worldwide, including many in Africa and Latin America, Pentecostalism is now a global phenomenon.”²⁵ Pew Research Center published another report regarding the statistics of Pentecostals. It states,

According to the World Christian Database, at least a quarter of the world’s 2 billion Christians are thought to be members of these lively, highly personal faiths, which emphasize such spiritually renewing “gifts of the Holy Spirit” as speaking in tongues, divine healing and prophesying.²⁶

In an effort to promote this report, Russell Heimlich wrote an article called “Pentecostals and Gifts of the Holy Spirit.” He describes the Pentecostal experience:

Pentecostals are more likely than other Christians to report having experienced or witnessed divine healings, having received direct revelations from God and having experienced or seen exorcisms. 62% of U.S. Pentecostals say they have witnessed divine healings and 54% say they have received direct revelations from God. Pentecostals from other parts of the world — including Latin America, Africa and Asia — are also more likely than other Christians to report such experiences, with 86% of Kenyan Pentecostals saying they have witnessed or experienced an exorcism.²⁷

²⁴ Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life, October 17, 2019, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

²⁵ David Masci, “Why has Pentecostalism grown so dramatically in Latin America?” Pew Research Center, November 14, 2014, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/11/14/why-has-pentecostalism-grown-so-dramatically-in-latin-america/>.

²⁶ Pew Research Center, “Spirit and Power – A 10-Country Survey of Pentecostals,” Pew Research Center on Polling and Analysis, October 5, 2006, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/spirit-and-power/>.

²⁷ Russell Heimlich, “Pentecostals and gifts of the Holy Spirit,” Pew Research Center, October 24, 2007, accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2007/10/24/pentecostals-and-gifts-of-the-holy-spirit/>.

Mark Stibbe defines prophetic evangelism in his book, *Prophetic Evangelism*. He says, “Prophetic evangelism is simply God using revelatory phenomena to speak to the hearts of those who don’t know Jesus.”²⁸ Stibbe outlines many personal examples of how prophetic words opened the door for him to minister the Gospel. He also lists the story of Samaritan woman in John 4 and how Jesus’ prophetic word or word of knowledge about her having five husbands, radically changed her. She even became an evangelist immediately by telling her town what Jesus did.

Stibbe also shares a story of his friend Jonathan, a prophetic minister. Jonathan ministered to a young man in a pub by giving him a prophetic word that he was dying from AIDS. The boy testified that it was true and that he had been crying out to God that day on the streets to know and see that God is real and cares for him. With this prophetic word, Jonathan was able to lead this young man to receive Christ. Stibbe comments,

A move of God is already occurring among the poor. It is now beginning to spread into the mainstream of society. One of the greatest resources in evangelism is proving to be prophetic revelation. Indeed, I sense in my spirit that the gift of prophecy will turn out to be a golden sickle in the hands of the harvesters. This should encourage us to recognize that it’s time to get stuck into prophetic evangelism!²⁹

For persons in Pentecostal and Charismatic streams, this kind of ministering has already become an assimilated practice because these Christians choose to embrace the unlearning process of discarding former ways of ministering in order to build a new mindset and practice of ministry. However, old patterns and knowledge prevents many other Christians from receiving and using the gift of prophecy. Michael Slaughter, an

²⁸ Mark Stibbe, *Prophetic Evangelism* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Lifestyle), 2004, 3.

²⁹ Stibbe, *Prophetic Evangelism*, 58.

author and Pastor Emeritus at Ginghamburg Church, authored a book called *Unlearning Church*. He urges the Church to unlearn old patterns and rules of the past. He says,

UnLearning is about going a different direction. UnLearning means repentance. It requires us to identify ways we were wrong and to rebuild in a new direction. UnLearning is about breaking away from the pack because a crowd will always be slower to respond to the radical voice of Jesus Christ. UnLearning is about ways the Holy Spirit can adjust your leadership skills and attitudes. Then you, in return, can lead the way for a similar transformation in others.³⁰

Unlearning is a necessary skill for societies and churches. There are significant consequences when humans do not engage in the unlearning process. Kris Taylor writes in an article, “The Skill of Unlearning,”

Those without “unlearning” in their repertoire see their current worldview as the only one, unquestionable and enduring. This inability to deconstruct current thinking can lead to colossal missteps, such as William Orton, President of Western Union declining to buy the patent for the telephone for \$100K. His reply: “Mr. Bell, after careful consideration of your invention, while it is a very interesting novelty, we have come to the conclusion it has no commercial possibilities... What use could this company have for an electrical toy?”

Examples abound. Kodak, the first to have digital imaging capability, clung to the belief that their business, even in a digital world, would be MORE in demand, as people would print more and more, points to its undoing. Blockbuster could not unlearn their corner store business model – and as a result Netflix took them down. Gateway had 25% of the personal use PC market, but is a mere footnote now, due to the inability to let go of the belief that consumers ONLY wanted desktop computers.³¹

Slaughter also recognizes that unlearning is the key to becoming successful in planting churches in a new age. He says, “The call is to unlearn—to break the rules of conventional wisdom in order to translate God’s ancient purposes to today’s postmodern world. The challenge is to translate and target those purposes to each indigenous

³⁰ Michael Slaughter, *Unlearning Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 2008, 19.

³¹ Kris Taylor, “The Skill of Unlearning,” *Evergreen Leadership*, August 20, 2015, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://evergreenleadership.com/2015/08/20/the-skill-of-unlearning/>.

environment.”³² Failure to unlearn exemplified in Blockbuster’s decline and disappearance, often results in bankruptcy in the business world. The inability to unlearn in the Church also leads to failure, spiritual bankruptcy. In his book, Slaughter talks about the failures of the religious leaders in Jesus’ time. Slaughter states,

One mistake church leaders make is thinking that their success and worth as a pastor are in doing it “by the book,” adhering strictly to the rule book of their denomination or by legalistically focusing on every detail in the Book—the Bible itself.

Jesus lived in an era when well-trained leaders were on every corner, but these leaders were neither relevant nor contagious. They knew all 613 commandments in the Torah, and were quick to correct people if they didn’t follow them precisely; but the people were not looking for correction, they were seeking the presence of God. Some left the comforts of Jerusalem’s magnificent temple, letting their search for God take them out into the wilderness to listen to a prophet named John who wasn’t deemed religiously correct or within the boundaries of traditional expressions of faith.³³

Christians must not make the error of shutting themselves off to the uncommon and misunderstood biblical truths. Christians need to be willing to step into the wilderness of the unlearning and relearning process so that they can become salt and light on the earth as Jesus commanded, especially because other people desire to hear the voice of God. When God’s people do not reveal the Father’s voice, people will settle for counterfeits.

If one cannot hear God’s voice from their church, they may go to a different church that can speak prophetically to them. Other persons, however, will turn to New Age practices to tap into the supernatural realm. Phil Johnson is the Executive Director of Grace to You, which features the preaching ministry of John MacArthur. Johnson writes

³² Slaughter, *Unlearning Church*, 16-17.

³³ Slaughter, *Unlearning Church*, 140.

in his article, “What’s New with the New Age? Why Christians Need to Remain on Guard against the Threat of New Age Spirituality,” “New Age Spirituality is fast-food religion perfectly suited for a postmodern culture like ours. It offers a quick-and-easy felling of satisfaction with almost no real nourishment for the soul, while it contains additives and artificial ingredients that are actually harmful to true spiritual health.”³⁴

Claire Gecewicz adds to the discussion of the dangers of new age beliefs. In a report by Pew Research Center, she states,

Most American adults self-identify as Christians. But many Christians also hold what are sometimes characterized as “New Age” beliefs – including belief in reincarnation, astrology, psychics and the presence of spiritual energy in physical objects like mountains or trees. Many Americans who are religiously unaffiliated also have these beliefs.

Overall, roughly six-in-ten American adults accept at least one of these New Age beliefs. Specifically, four-in-ten believe in psychics and that spiritual energy can be found in physical objects, while somewhat smaller shares express belief in reincarnation (33%) and astrology (29%).³⁵

New Age practices pose serious threats to Christianity, and people’s involvement with the New Age reveals the strong interest humans have in the spiritual world. It is not that people are always unwilling to unlearn the natural mechanics of life and former cognitive perceptions, as involvement in other ungodly spiritual practices demonstrate. Instead, it is that Christians are often too fearful, religious or resistant to dismantle their

³⁴ Phil Johnson, “What’s New with the New Age? Why Christians Need to Remain on Guard against the Threat of New Age Spirituality,” accessed November 22, 2022, https://sbts-wordpress-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/equip/uploads/2010/02/sbjt_104_johnson.pdf.

³⁵ Claire Gecewicz, “‘New Age’ beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans,” Pew Research Center, October 1, 2018, accessed November 22, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/>.

once held beliefs about the supernatural to engage in the most authentic and correct spiritual experiences that lead to life.

While Satan attempts to deceive the world through occultic prophetic gifts in the New Age and other religions, Christians can be confident that God already designed a plan to release His prophetic gifts to His people. This was prophesied by Joel and quoted by Peter: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17). For the one willing to forget his old and powerless way of life, this one may prophesy. It is clear, however, that not everyone believes this.

John Nelson Darby, for example, was adamant to pursue holiness, but he stayed away from the religious establishment of his time and from the spiritual gifts. He rebuked Edward Irving’s supposed wayward teachings that championed the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Other scholars in the modern prophetic movement, however, hold different views regarding Irving and his practice of the biblical gifts. For example, Ernest B. Gentile writes in his book, *Your Sons & Daughters Shall Prophesy*, that Edward Irving and the Catholic Apostolic Church (A.D. 1830), along with two other movements, The Apostolic Church of Great Britain (A.D. 1916) and the Latter Rain Movement (A.D. 1948), are the three movements that God used to recover the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the body of Christ before the modern prophetic movement officially started in the 1980s. He says,

Each of these evangelical groups was thoroughly devoted to Christ and the Bible and characterized by the ministry of prophecy in the local church, a belief in glossolalia and a belief in contemporary apostles and prophets.

These three renewal movements (in contrast to the larger Pentecostal and charismatic renewal movements) provide convenient windows for easier viewing

of the blessings and problems connected with spiritual manifestations, particularly prophecy.³⁶

It is a pity that Darby did not see this and thereby help Irving foster a richer environment that would allow the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be balanced with the holiness he pursued. If this had been the case, how much more benefit would it have brought the modern prophetic movement. The necessity remains today for God's prophetic church to rise up and be who she was intended to be, pure and holy but also full of the Spirit.

The LCM was greatly influenced by Darby and the Brethren Movement.³⁷ For Watchman Nee, the founder of the LCM, it was necessary to both learn and unlearn things taught by the Brethren Movement. Nee intended to receive all the biblical truths they taught but unlearn any human traditions. In one of Nee's early publications, *The Christians*, which is a periodical that helps promote the LCM, Nee said,

We believe that the Bible is God's Word, word-for-word. We believe in a literal interpretation of all the major truths of the Bible... The Bible is our only standard. We are not afraid to preach the pure Word of the Bible, even if men oppose; but if it is not the Word of the Bible, we could never agree even if everyone approved of it.³⁸

One example of Nee's unlearning is recorded in Witness Lee's book, *Watchman Nee-A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*. Lee speaks to the issue that many Chinese Christians were not assured of their salvation. Lee says regarding Nee,

As he began to preach the gospel, he discovered the need of some clear teaching concerning assurance of salvation. Along with his preaching of the gospel, he

³⁶ Ernest B. Gentile, *Your Sons & Daughters Shall Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books), 1999, 267-268.

³⁷ Witness Lee, *The History of the Church and the Local Churches*, chap. 5, sec. 4 (1973), in Living Stream Ministry, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=1CF2C02D4B>.

³⁸ Watchman Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, (Set 1) Vol. 07: The Christian (5)* (1992), in Living Stream Ministry, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=11EFE607C1>.

incorporated the clear word of the Bible concerning the assurance of salvation. In the twelve years between 1922 and 1934, through his labor this matter was made clear to the Chinese Christians. In the fall of 1933, I was invited to preach in a chapel of a Presbyterian hospital in the city of Soochow, Kiangsu. While telling the audience that they could know assuredly that they were saved according to the Bible, I noticed the pastor shaking his head, indicating that he did not agree. This incident depicted the ignorant situation of so many Christians concerning the matter of salvation in China at that time. Since 1934, however, up to this present moment, the two matters of salvation by grace and the assurance of salvation have become crystal clear to the Christians in the Far East, and it has become popular to preach these truths in all the denominations.³⁹

Nee faced major opposition when he dismantled the traditional teaching that pastors needed to earn their salvation through Christian ministry. Witness Lee, one of Nee's coworkers, followed suit to unlearn certain traditions and relearn biblical truths lost in history. This is why the LCM is also referred to as the Lord's Recovery.⁴⁰ One of the truths Lee recovered was the practice of pray reading. Pray reading is an essential part of Lee's model for prophesying: PSRP (Pray Reading, Study, Recite, Prophecy). One of the most famous opponents to Lee's pray reading is Stephen Kaung, a coworker of both Nee and Lee since the early 1930's.⁴¹ Kaung did not agree with Lee's practice of pray reading and he criticized Lee by calling it "the latent power of the soul," which is the name of one of Nee's publications. Nee says,

Perhaps they were told by the devil or the evil spirits. Although their theories are somewhat different, the principle behind their teachings is the same: to release the soulish power by some special means. They may not use the term "the soulish power," but the fact is there. For example, Taoists, Buddhists, and some Christian sects, such as the Charismatics and Christian Scientists (this one has branches in Shanghai and Tientsin), have special and supernatural power to perform

³⁹ Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee-A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministries, 1991), 273.

⁴⁰ Witness Lee, *A Brief Presentation of the Lord's Recovery*, chap. 1, sec. 2 (1993), in Living Stream Ministry, accessed November 12, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n>.

⁴¹SI, "A History of the Kaung and Lee Lines in America," The Church of Gideon and His 300 Men, April 18, 2018, accessed November 13, 2020, <http://lordsrecovery.us/LeeKaungLinesinAmerica.pdf>.

seemingly miraculous things. Some claim that they can heal diseases, and some even predict the future.⁴²

Kaung's disbelief in pray reading and a number of other disagreements led Lee and Kaung to part ways. However, Lee's practice of pray reading has helped many members in the LCM and outside of the LCM to enter the presence of the Lord and receive revelation from the Word of God. Liu Tong is a pastor from a Taiwan-based Pentecostal denomination called Bread of Life Christian Church in Taipei. Liu openly testifies to the benefits pray reading has had on his ministry and those under his ministry. Liu is now the pastor of River of Life Christian Church in Silicon Valley, California.

According to his website,

In September 1996, concerned about the lack of spirituality of Silicon Valley workers, Pastor Liu Wei began working on a daily spiritual line, sharing five minutes of telephone calls a day to lead believers to read the scriptures chapter by chapter in a life-like tone. Over the years, not only in the telephone technology breakthrough, but also touched the lives of countless Chinese Christians throughout North America. The original simple idea, in the hands of God, has become a bridge to connect thousands of miles of blessings.⁴³

Liu testifies publicly that in the beginning he did not have much enlightenment to share with his listeners, so he started the practice of pray reading which he learned from the LCM. He would pray read the word of God out loud and meditate on it. He testifies that every time he engaged in pray reading, the Holy Spirit would give him revelation to share with his listeners. Both his listeners and he were surprised by the revelations he received after pray reading. He says,

When I pray read the Word of God, I find this method is the easiest way to read the Bible. You surely will get enlightenment as long as you read it aloud and pray

⁴² Kaung and Lee Lines in America - A History, Accessed on November 13, 2020, <http://lordsrecovery.us/LeeKaungLinesinAmerica.pdf>.

⁴³ River of Life Christian Church, "Spiritual line," accessed November 13, 2020, <https://www.rolcc.net/rolcc/spiritual-hotline>.

read repeatedly. I used to read Psalm 89:14: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.”⁴⁴ The more I pray read it (the verse), the more I felt it wonderfully. I have never saw this wonderful picture before. The Lord is sitting on the foundation of righteousness and justice, but His steadfast love walks before Him. When a person gets to know God, it starts from His steadfast love. Then His faithfulness is around Him. It is only when we get closer to God more often, then we can experience His faithfulness. Have you read the Word of God today? When you read the Word of God through Pray Reading, then the Word of God can become your help and strength.⁴⁵

Nowadays Liu is a successful and famous preacher among the Chinese Christian community and his ministry is especially influential among Chinese Pentecostal Christians. Lee’s practice of pray reading can be credited with positively impacting people like Liu of other denominations. None of this would be possible, however, if Lee had not set his mind to unlearn certain practices and traditions and embrace others. Lee understood and recognized the fact that humans are limited by previous knowledge.

While tradition is an enormous hindrance stopping persons from engaging in the unlearning process, there are motivating factors behind the refusal to unlearn. Author Irving H. Buchen lists some of these in his article, “An Organizational New Year’s Resolution: To Unlearn.” He writes,

Moreover, changing one's ways is not easy, let alone changing one's thinking about one's ways. Workers may worry that a new approach will be unacceptable or that they will embarrass themselves by trying something different.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ps. 89:14.

⁴⁵ Tong Liu, “Spiritual Nourishment,” *Daily Devotion with Pastor Tong Liu* (blog), January 29, 2018, accessed November 13, 2020, <http://riveroflifedailydevotion-mobile.blogspot.com/2018/01/412-15.html>. The post is in Chinese and translated by the author of this paper.

⁴⁶ Irving H. Buchen, “An Organizational New Year’s Resolution: To Unlearn,” *National Productivity Review* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 1, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/npr.4040180102>.

Thomas evaluates and expands on Buchen's point by adding that complacency and fear of failure are large contributors to the resistance of unlearning a tradition and relearning new knowledge. She says,

Paramount in Buchen's thinking was the idea that organizational success often fostered complacency. Despite the negative valuation often ascribed to failure it could contribute greatly to organizational creativity, if approached with a positive attitude. For Buchen, this receptiveness to mistakes and failure was indicative of an unlearning culture.⁴⁷

Understanding the psychology of why persons resist unlearning is important. For evangelicals, most dare not pursue speaking in tongues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit because they are afraid of being deceived by evil spirits or engaging in something that will lead them astray. They fear becoming disobedient to God, and their resistance is actually rooted in a deep love for Christ. Buchen and Thomas help leaders in the church understand how to help lay people and other Christians enter and make peace with the process of unlearning by exposing such fears, communicating about them and bringing revelation and proper translation of God's Word to the table. Perhaps then persons may be willing to forget their former way of doing things to walk on a riskier path with Christ and other charismatic believers.

Conclusion

Unlearning requires that a person willingly let go of their former beliefs, attitudes and perspectives to courageously build upon former knowledge in such a way that transformation takes place. Unlearning is a process that obliges one to relearn how to approach life and decisions with a different mindset and strategy. Professors,

⁴⁷ Thomas, "Towards a new definition."

psychologists, businessmen and other professionals are catching on to this cognitive phenomenon because of the growth and maturity it offers.

In the context of the Church and within Christian denominations, the theory of unlearning urges Christians to reconsider their traditions and former interpretations of the Word of the God. It also encourages believers to reevaluate their understanding of biblical and spiritual concepts in order to embrace and apply to their lives a more holistic model of a Spirit-filled believer. Biblical characters like Peter, Paul, Ananias and the Pharisees serve as examples of those invited into the unlearning process. The positive and negative consequences of their reception or refusal to unlearn and relearn are evident.

The LCM serves as a fitting example of a denomination and people capable of unlearning traditions to embrace biblical practices such as meditation on the Word of God. The LCM developed new habits and mindsets through pray reading. The LCM, however, did not go far enough to unlearn their understanding and practice of prophesying. LCM members still teach and embrace that prophecy is only forthtelling. If they were to engage in expanding their understanding of prophecy, they would see that prophecy includes forthtelling and foretelling components.

Likewise, Christians affiliated with Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations have embraced the unlearning process to the degree that they have allowed themselves to experiment and live according to a riskier and more supernatural way of life that includes prophecy and use of spiritual gifts. However, while learning to live and minister supernaturally, it can be argued that some of these persons neglected personal maturity. They, therefore, could benefit from growth in their character and pursuit of holy living.

To deconstruct limitations and former beliefs that persons in evangelical or LCM traditions may have, this paper explores and promotes the theory and techniques of unlearning and relearning to grow in the gift of prophecy. To grow in devotion to prayer and holy living, Pentecostal and Charismatic persons can unlearn old habits or attitudes that are not fitting for God's people. They can learn to embrace new ways of reading and meditating upon the Word of God to change them. This can be done through the practice of pray reading.

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