

The year was 2004, and the leaders of the Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago were wondering how to take the spiritual life of their congregation to the next level. As part of that review, they asked themselves, “Is our church really helping people to become fully devoted followers of Christ, or are we just giving them a nice place to go to church?”

Although on the surface it looked as though things were going very well indeed, Willow Creek’s research revealed that they weren’t really doing a very good job of facilitating true spiritual transformation. To their credit, Willow Creek not only didn’t hide the results of that study, but they embarked on seven years of research to discover all they could about the disciple-making process—about what “fully-devoted followers of Jesus” actually look like, and how people can be encouraged to move in that direction.

The result of this research has been the discovery of four statistically verifiable stages in Christian growth, stages that move pre-Christians from “**Exploring Christ**” to “**Growing in Christ**” to “**Close to Christ**” and finally to “**Christ-Centered**” lives.²

With four stages, there are obviously three transitions between the stages, and the characteristics of those movements have also been statistically verified. This morning, I want to give you an overview of what these four stages and these three transitions look like, because turning non-religious people into fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ is our goal, too.



You know by now that I like to use the term “Great Commission Christians” as a synonym for “fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ.” Every enterprise in which we engage and every activity that we do has producing Great Commission Christians as its goal. Every worship service, every Bible study, every youth event, every meeting, every outreach effort, every mission trip—everything we do—has this single purpose.

We’ve spent a lot of time over the last six weeks defining Great Commission Christians, because producing Great Commission Christians is our bottom line. That’s the business we’re in. That’s the Commission we have. If we’re not doing a good job here, nothing else we do matters very much.

The Willow Creek research discovered several significant spiritual principles that underlie this project of producing Great Commission Christians:

1. It really is possible to measure spiritual growth.
2. Being more active in church activities does not necessarily result in spiritual growth.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on June 10, 2012.

² Greg Hawkins & Cally Parkinson, *MOVE: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

3. The longer people attend church without becoming believers, the less likely they are to ever choose to commit their lives to Christ.
4. Nothing has a greater impact on spiritual growth than personal study of the Bible.
5. Even the most devoted followers of Jesus still have a long way to go on their journey of becoming Christ-like.³

With all this as background, let's look briefly at the four stages of Christian growth the Willow Creek research discovered and at the transitions that move us from one stage to the next. The BIG IDEA here is to get a general idea of how the process works, to begin to wonder where you are in that process, and then to "Get a Move On" toward spiritual maturity, so that each of us "*attains to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:13).

1. EXPLORING CHRIST. According Willow Creek's research, "Those who are Exploring Christ are still on the perimeter of faith, evaluating Christianity's core beliefs and checking out the community of people who embrace those beliefs—but they themselves remain unwilling or unready to fully join in" (p. 32).

The research emphasizes that believing that God exists and having a personal relationship with God are two *very* different things (p. 35). This is the same distinction I made last week with the quote from Søren Kierkegaard—that religious belief without real personal experience is "just about as genuine as tea made from a bit of paper which once lay in a drawer beside another bit of paper which had once been used to wrap up a few dried tea leaves from which tea had already been made three times."⁴

One of the most sobering discoveries of the research is that the longer a person in the Exploring Christ stage continues to attend worship without making a commitment to Christ, the less likely they are to ever follow Him (p. 37). The longer we toy with the idea of committing our lives to Jesus, the less urgent that decision seems to us.

There's a story that three apprentice demons were taking a final exam on how to seduce humans into destruction. "I will tell them there is no God," said the first. "I will tell them there is no hell," said the second. But the third more wisely said, "I will tell them there is no *hurry*." The attitude that most often leads to disaster is that which says there is plenty of time.

MOVEMENT 1. The Willow Creek researchers called the transition between EXPLORING CHRIST and GROWING IN CHRIST "MOVEMENT 1," and this transition resembles the early growth of a friendship, much like a human relationship that progresses from mere acquaintance to regular meetings for lunch. Much of MOVEMENT 1 happens in the context of normal church activities (p. 109), and according to the research, the top five catalysts that move a person from EXPLORING CHRIST to GROWING IN CHRIST are these:

1. Belief in **Salvation by Grace** ("I believe nothing I do or have done can earn my salvation.");
2. Belief in **The Trinity** ("I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.");
3. **Service in the Church** ("I serve in a church ministry once a month or more.");
4. **Prayer to Seek Guidance** ("I pray to seek guidance for my life."); and
5. **Reflection on Scripture** ("I reflect on Scripture for meaning in my life.").

³ Hawkins & Parkinson, pp. 18-20, 26. Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers refer to this book.

⁴ Malcomb Muggeridge, *A Third Testament* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p.138.

The reasons that talking to God and reflecting on the Bible are so important in our spiritual growth is that they're the primary channels God uses to communicate love and guidance to us. We hear and respond to God through reflecting on Scripture, praying, practicing solitude, and personally engaging in service to others. Apart from these *personal* spiritual practices, our relationship with God is mostly limited to whatever we pick up through other people (p. 117). This is another way of making Kierkegaard's point about the paper and the tea.

2. GROWING IN CHRIST. When we come to the second stage of spiritual growth, here's an example of what "Growing in Christ" looks like:

During an evening commute, Mark came upon a man who seemed to be hungry, standing in front of the Taco Bell at the food court of the train station. "I just felt this nudge—and this is very unlike me—" Mark said, "to ask him if he was hungry and if I could get him something. But he said, 'No, thank you. I ate earlier.' Then he proceeded to talk to me, which made me extremely uncomfortable. I was thinking, 'Dude, I'll just buy you dinner and then you go your way and I'll go mine.' But we ended up talking for several minutes. He said he was an artist and that he wanted me to come by his stand so he could give me some art."

On the way home, Mark replayed that experience in his thoughts, and over the next several days, he became aware of a new stirring in his heart. "I was just overwhelmed by the presence of God," he said. "Like this whole opportunity to reflect Christ's compassion came because I took a risk; and it's things like that that increase my hunger to do more" (p. 59).

Growing in Christ folks are transitioning from experiencing God primarily in worship on the weekend to a friendship that is present with them through the week, at work, at home—no matter where they are (p. 61). The focus gradually shifts from external activities to the condition of the heart, with our level of spiritual development being based in large measure on the choices we make every day (pp. 64, 73).

The five most influential catalysts for MOVEMENT 2 are:

1. **Believing in a personal God** ("I believe that God is actively involved in my life.");
2. **Praying to seek guidance daily** (instead of frequently);
3. **Reflecting on Scripture frequently;**
4. **Having six or more meaningful spiritual conversations with non-Christians in a year;**
5. **Tithing** (giving ten percent or more to the church; p. 146).

MOVEMENT 2. "While MOVEMENT 1 is primarily about building trust in Christ through acceptance of foundational beliefs, MOVEMENT 2 is all about growing a personal relationship with Christ through increasingly frequent communication—communication that is achieved through personal spiritual practices" (p. 143).

MOVEMENT 2 is similar to the change that comes when a human friendship moves from being defined by the boundaries of a shared setting like work or school or shared activities such as hobbies or sports to a friendship characterized by frequent communication about the daily issues of life. This shift takes place as someone you'd call for a racquetball game becomes someone you'd call in a crisis, and the transformation that comes in our relationship with Jesus is much like that (p. 109).

3. CLOSE TO CHRIST. For those who have grown through MOVEMENT 2, faith has now become a deeply personal and significant force that is relevant to their every waking

moment. The spiritual transformation that began to be noticeable in the Growing in Christ stage is now becoming internalized as Christlike character.

Persons who are Close to Christ continue to deepen their love of God through ongoing, regular practice of prayer and Bible study, and they're increasingly willing to be identified as followers of, and advocates for, Jesus whether they are inside or outside the walls of the church.

Persons who are Close to Christ have a high degree of personal ownership of their spiritual journey. The researchers found that, "Unlike those in the previous segment, the faith walk of those who are Close to Christ is *not* dependent on spiritual mentors, dynamic preaching, or compelling Bible studies. While most of them believe that belonging to a church is essential to their ongoing spiritual growth, they take on much of the responsibility for advancing their own relationship with Christ" (pp. 67-68).

For those who are Close to Christ, Jesus is present with them everywhere they go. They're learning what it means to pray without ceasing. One might say that "Jesus is in the car, but He's not yet in the driver's seat" (p. 78); and that brings us to MOVEMENT 3.

MOVEMENT 3. MOVEMENT 3 has to do with further transformation of the heart, and it takes place largely outside of church, as every hour of every day becomes holy. MOVEMENT 3 is a transformation of love that brings an increasing yieldedness of spirit that results from the increasingly fervent practice of personal spiritual disciplines (pp. 154-155). MOVEMENT 3 has to do with a change similar to what happens when the friend you'd call in a crisis becomes someone with whom you fully share your life. A frequent biblical image for such a relationship is the soul intimacy of marriage.

Persons who are Christ-Centered practice spiritual disciplines not so much to grow in knowledge as to deepen their love relationship with God. Rather than expecting Jesus to be concerned with helping *them* with *their* lives, Christ-Centered believers understand that they are called to lay down their lives to serve *Him* and to advance *His* mission in the world (p. 93). The five most influential catalysts for MOVEMENT 3 are:

1. **Giving away their lives** ("I am willing to risk everything that's important in my life for Jesus Christ.");
2. **Deciding that Christ is first** ("I desire Jesus to be first in my life.");
3. **Embracing an identity in Christ** ("I exist to know, love, and serve God.");
4. **Believing in the authority of the Bible** ("I believe that the Bible has decisive authority over what I say and do.");
5. **Reflecting on Scripture daily** (instead of frequently; p. 162).

As our spiritual transformation progresses toward a Christ-Centered life, our friendship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit has now moved from a casual hand wave across the church parking lot to a friendship in which we are able to complete each other's sentences. Our hearts and minds, our wills and our passions, are more and more becoming one.

CHRIST-CENTERED. Here's an example of what Christ-Centered living looks like: When rumors of layoffs began swirling through the Christian college where Megan worked, a coworker turned to her for counsel. "She was obviously very fearful," Megan remembers, "so she came into my office to talk and to pray." After six years as director of career services, Megan was known for her deep devotion to Christ. And she loved her work, building her department while enjoying personal interaction with hundreds of students as they prepared to launch their own careers.

Megan didn't expect that the layoffs would directly affect her own position: she was simply praying out of concern for her friend. "Then, all of a sudden, I just stopped in the middle of the prayer and opened my eyes," she says. "Right there in the office that I loved, in this school that I loved, in a job that I loved, I said to God, '**Bring it on.**'"

Her friend sat up in surprise, but Megan continued her prayer, "**Bring it on, God. Whatever you have that is going to make me more like you and make my life glorify you more, bring it on.**" Less than twenty-four hours after that prayer, Megan's boss informed her that her job had been eliminated.

Megan would be the first to tell you that loving God requires trusting that God knows what's best for your life. And she readily acknowledges that she spent a year grieving the loss of a job that she loved. Recently, though, she began a new job, working for a vocational college in the Chicago suburbs. "It's very, very different from my old position," she says, "but I find I am enjoying going to work every day. And this whole thing was just another way to open the door to God. It was a way for me to say, 'You know what? I'm going to step aside, God. **Do whatever you want to do with my life.**'" (p. 82; see Matthew 26:42).

The key to MOVEMENT 3 is this very willingness "to risk everything that's important in my life for Jesus Christ" (p. 153). It was such a transformation that caused Paul to write these words:

*⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ **I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead** (Philippians 3:7-11).⁵*

The Willow Creek researchers noted that "Christ-centered believers emerge from a battle between two sets of values—the secular values that define personal identity, happiness, security, and success for most of the world, and the spiritual values of selfless love and dedication to others that characterize a life centered on Jesus. In every other segment of the spiritual continuum, the values scale tips in favor of the secular.

Even those who are Close to Christ have worldly aspirations that constantly compete with Jesus for determining the direction of their lives. But the men and women who are Christ-Centered have, in large part, relinquished those secular values and worldly aspirations and yielded that control to Christ (p. 84).

The researchers caution that "We're not suggesting that Christ-Centered individuals have 'arrived' and are no longer in need of growth. But **it is the reality of a surrendered life that defines them and frees them to respond to the call of God.** The choice to fully surrender to Jesus all that we hold dear is not just a one-time event—it is an ongoing process, a lifestyle of daily surrenders that define and shape our character" (p. 85).

Satan has another favorite lie that runs a close second to "*There's no hurry.*" The second lie is "*What you're doing is good enough.*" Bill Hybels, the Pastor of Willow Creek, warned that "Satan knows he would never succeed in involving many of us in outright Satan worship, so instead he has a Plan B. He will simply try to take the edge off your full devotion

⁵ Philippians 3:10-11 is my "Life Verse."

to Christ. He will try to convince you that 80 percent or 90 percent or even 95 percent devotion is good enough. But that's a *lie*. Jesus demands *full* devotion. Ninety-five percent is 5 percent short. You must surrender all. Everything" (pp. 248-249).

"Not that I have already obtained all this," Paul wrote, *"or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. **But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus**"* (Philippians 3:12-14).

All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.

*I surrender all, I surrender all.
All to Thee, my blessed Savior,
I surrender all.*

All to Jesus I surrender,
Humbly at His feet I bow,
Worldly pleasures all forsaken,
Take me, Jesus, take me now.

All to Jesus I surrender,
Make me, Savior, wholly Thine;
May Thy Holy Spirit fill me,
May I know Thy pow'r divine.

All to Jesus I surrender,
Lord, I give myself to Thee;
Fill me with Thy love and power,
Let Thy blessing fall on me.

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