

Finishing Well
A conversation about living for Jesus on the back nine of life

Conversation Five: Spiritual Maturity: A Worthy Lifetime Pursuit
– What is my spiritual life supposed to look like at 65? 75? 85?

A few questions to start the conversation...

- Should all Christians attain “spiritual maturity? Why or why not?
- Do most Christians attain spiritual maturity?
- What are the marks of spiritual maturity?

1. Some Key Scripture

John 15:13-17 – Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. (Jesus to the Disciples at the Last Supper)

Colossians 1:28-29 – We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

2. What is “Spiritual Maturity”?

Many people don't know what it is. Based on its own research, in 2009 the Barna Group issued a report entitled “Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity,” which outlines several challenges facing American churches. These challenges include:

- Most Christians equate spiritual maturity with following the rules—“trying hard to follow the rules in the Bible.”
- Most churchgoers are **not** clear what their church expects in terms of spiritual maturity. “An open-ended survey question asked churchgoers to describe how their church defined a ‘healthy, spiritually mature follower of Jesus.’ Half of the churchgoers simply said they were not sure, unable to venture a guess regarding the church’s definition.”
- Most Christians offer one-dimensional views of personal spiritual maturity. “Further reflecting a lack of depth on the subject, the open-ended questions typically produced, on average, just one response from survey respondents, despite the fact that interviewers repeatedly probed for additional or clarifying comments.”



And it is certainly **not Casual Christianity**. In a 2009 report by the Barna Group, titled “Casual Christians and the Future of America,” the Barna Group states that “Casual Christians” represent 66% of the adult population of the U.S. In an interview, George Barna defines the term “Casual Christians” this way:

Casual Christianity is faith in moderation. It allows them to feel religious without having to prioritize their faith. Christianity is low-risk, predictable proposition for this tribe, providing a faith perspective that is not demanding. A Casual Christian can be all the things that they esteem: a nice human being, a family person, religious, an exemplary citizen, a reliable employee—and never have to publicly defend or represent difficult moral or social positions or even lose much sleep over their private choices as long as they mean well and generally do their best. From their perspective, their brand of faith practice is genuine, realistic and practical. To them, Casual Christianity is the best of all worlds; it encourages them to be a better person than if they had been irreligious, yet it is not a faith into which they feel compelled to heavily invest themselves.

3. Definition of “Spiritual Maturity”

Spiritual Maturity has as its goal, a lifetime of loving and experiencing God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and loving and serving our neighbor. Spiritual Maturity is the worthy lifetime pursuit to know and love God and to love my neighbor as myself.

4. Pieces of the “Spiritual Maturity” Puzzle

- a. A Life of Devotion / Devotional Habits / Spiritual Disciplines / Abiding in Christ

“Keeping company with Jesus” (Calhoun) / “Making space for God” (Nouwen) / “Apprentices of Jesus” (Foster) / “Staidness in the Divine Center” (Foster) / “The with-God life” (Foster)

Proceed with Great Caution

I mean this sort of thing. I say my prayers, I read a book of devotion, I prepare for, or receive, the Sacrament. But while I do these things, there is, so to speak, a voice inside me that urges caution. It tells me to be careful, to keep my head, not to go too far, not to burn my boats. I come into the presence of God with a great fear lest anything should happen to me within that presence which will prove too intolerably inconvenient when I have come out again into my ‘ordinary’ life. I don’t want to be carried away into any resolution which I shall afterwards regret. For I know I shall be feeling quite different after breakfast. I don’t want anything to happen to me at the altar which will run up too big a bill to pay then. It would be very disagreeable, for instance, to take the duty of charity (while I am at the altar) so seriously that after breakfast I had to tear up the really stunning reply I had written to an impudent correspondent yesterday and meant to post today.

– C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory, “A Slip of the Tongue”, pp. 185 – 186.

The Minimum Amount / Our Lifeline to the Temporal

This is my endlessly recurrent temptation: to go down to the Sea (I think St. John of the Cross called God a sea) and there neither dive nor swim nor float, but only dabble and splash, careful not to get out of my depth and holding on to the lifeline which connects me with my things temporal.

It is different from the temptations that met us at the beginning of the Christian life. Then we fought (at least I fought) against admitting the claims of the eternal at all. And when we had fought, and been beaten, and surrendered, we supposed that all would be fairly plain sailing. This temptation comes later. It is addressed to those who have already admitted the claim in principle and are even making some sort of effort to meet it. Our temptation is to look eagerly for the minimum that will be accepted. We are in fact very like honest but reluctant taxpayers. We approve of an income tax in principle. We make our returns truthfully. But we dread a rise in the tax. We are very careful to pay no more than is necessary. And we hope—we very ardently hope—that after we have paid it there will still be enough to live on.

– C.S. Lewis, The Weight of Glory, “A Slip of the Tongue”, pp. 187 – 188.

From Jan Johnson, *Spiritual Disciplines Companion*:

God desires to transform our souls. This transformation occurs as we recognize that God created us to live in an interactive relationship with the Trinity. Our task is not to transform ourselves, but to stay connected with God in as much of life as possible. As we pay attention to the nudges of the Holy Spirit, we become disciples of Christ. Our task is to do the connecting, while God does the perfecting. As we connect with God, we gradually begin acting more like Christ...Connecting with God changes us on the inside, and we slowly become the tenderhearted, conscientious people our families always wished we’d become. This transformation of our souls through the work of the Holy Spirit results in ‘Christ in you, the hope of Glory’ (Col 1:27). (p.7)

Psalm 27:4 – One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple. (David)

Acts 13:22 – (Paul speaking at the synagogue in Antioch about God's praise of David:) After removing Saul, [God] made David [Israel's] king. [God] testified concerning [David]: 'I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'

Spiritual disciplines are needed to move Jesus into the central position within us.

From Earl Creps, Off-Road Disciplines:

... I contend here that an experience is a spiritual discipline if it has the potential to form God's heart in me, and if it functions as one because I embrace it as such.... [T]he off-road disciplines, both personal and organizational, serve to decenter me and my ideas by freeing up the place where Christ rightfully belongs in my life, my leadership, and my organization. (p. xvi)

...the off-road disciplines serve the function of making space in our lives so that Jesus assumes the central position within us and the Spirit conforms us to the mission. The alternative is to reduce mission to evangelism, evangelism to a program, a program to a strategy, and strategy to a technology we can control. (p. xvi)

A missional life, then, experiences the centrality of Christ as our failures expose the illusion that we merit the center position. (p.10)

b. Love of God – The Greatest Commandment

Matthew 22:34-38 – Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: '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.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 – Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon 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.

Psalms 1:1-3 – Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

c. Love of Others – The Second Greatest Commandment

Matthew 22:39-40 – And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

John 13:34-35 – "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

1 John 2:7-11 – Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.

1 John 3:11 – This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.



d. Obedience to God

1 Peter 1:1-2 – To God’s elect...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

1 John 2:3 – We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.

1 John 3:21b-24 – ...we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

1 John 5:3 – This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome,

2 John 1:6 – And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

e. Fruitfulness

John 15:1-10 – "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain



in the vine.

Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love."

5. Definition of "Spiritual Growth" – an increasing love for God and for other people

Matthew 22:37-39 – Jesus replied: "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."

We wanted to find evidence of spiritual growth in people, and then figure out what types of activities or circumstances triggered that spiritual growth. An increasing love for God and for other people was our working definition of spiritual growth. We based this definition on Jesus' description of the two greatest commandments...We took that to mean that spiritual growth occurs as one's love for God and others increases.

– From *Reveal, the Willow Creek Study* by Greg Hawkins & Cally Parkinson, p. 29.

6. Greater spiritual maturity depends on both the church's influence and personal spiritual practices.

From Greg Hawkins & Cally Parkinson, Reveal the Willow Creek Study:

So if the church isn't the driving force behind the later stages of spiritual growth, what is? That's where the second external element of spiritual growth comes into play: personal spiritual practices. These practices include prayer, journaling, solitude, studying Scripture—things that individuals do on their own to grow in their relationship with Christ. While personal spiritual practices are critical at all stages of spiritual growth, they become most important for those who are more spiritually mature. (p. 43)

Spiritual growth is all about growing a relationship with God through a commitment to, and a deepening relationship with, Jesus Christ. Growing a relationship—any relationship—requires time and energy. (p.44)

Our conclusion based on the data is this: The church doesn't need to handhold people who are moving along in the later stages of the spiritual continuum. An authentic Christ-Centered life is fundamentally the result of strong commitment to a growing personal relationship with Jesus Christ. (p.45)

7. “The Spiritual Continuum” – one way to look at spiritual growth

In “The Spiritual Continuum”, four spiritual growth segments are defined by the distance or closeness of one’s relationship to Christ. Spiritual growth is all about increasing relational closeness to Christ.

Comments from *Reveal, the Willow Creek Study* by Greg Hawkins & Cally Parkinson:

Segment:	Exploring Christianity	Growing in Christ	Close to Christ	Christ-Centered
Faith Statement:	“I believe in God, but I’m not sure about Christ. My faith is not a significant part of my life.”	“I believe in Jesus, and I’m working on what it means to get to know him.”	“I feel really close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance.”	“God is all I need in my life. He is enough. Everything I do is a reflection of Christ.”
Summary of the Segment:	These people are taking the first steps in spiritual growth and are marked by significantly lower levels of agreement with belief statements such as “I believe salvation comes only through Jesus Christ.”	These early believers are growing in their faith through church experiences and are also starting to incorporate personal spiritual practices into their normal routine outside of church.	These believers report much higher levels of personal spiritual practices than earlier segments. Serving emerges as an important expression of their faith. While their devotion to Christ is growing, they still hold back from full commitment.	These people have fully surrendered their lives to Christ, demonstrated by their dramatically higher levels of spiritual behavior and attitudes across the board. They “very strongly agree” that they seek God’s guidance in every area of their lives—at two times the level of any other segment.
Attitudes and Behaviors:	They do not involve God in their daily lives. They view the Bible as irrelevant. They need others to help them interpret spiritual issues. They seek God’s guidance only in time of need. They do not serve in the church.	They are discovering faith. They need others to help them interpret spiritual issues. They willingly participate in small groups. They sometimes read the Bible or Christian books.	The Bible provides direction for their lives. Prayer is central to their lives. They have not surrendered everything to Christ. Small groups are less important to them. Spiritual friends increase in importance to them. They serve regularly.	They love God more than anything. For them, prayer is constant conversation with God. They help to mentor others. Service to others is a way of life.
Needs:	Seeker services. Opportunities to connect with others.	Small group opportunities. Basic personal spiritual practices.	Serving opportunities. Advanced personal spiritual practices.	Mentoring opportunities. Wide range of serving opportunities.

8. Is the church a “spiritual parent” or “spiritual coach” for you?

People need to continually answer the spiritual growth question: “What is next for me?”

Comments from *Reveal, the Willow Creek Study* by Greg Hawkins & Cally Parkinson:

Historically at Willow, no matter where someone is along the spiritual continuum, our message has been the same: ‘We know what you need, and we can meet those needs for you.’ We now know this approach hasn’t

always served our congregation well. In many cases we have created an unhealthy dependence and inappropriate levels of expectation among those who call Willow home. One of the first things we did was to tell our congregation that we've been wrong for thinking it was our job to meet all of their spiritual growth needs. When Bill laid out the new strategic plan to the congregation in April 2007, he said, 'We have been wrong. We need to rethink the coaching we give you as you pursue your spiritual growth.' (p.64)

We want to move people from dependence on the church to a growing interdependent partnership with the church. We have to let people know early on in their journey that they need to look beyond the church to grow. Getting a weekly dose or two of what the church has to offer (even if it is great) will never be sufficient spiritual nutrition for survival, let alone growth. Our people need to learn to feed themselves through **spiritual practices** that allow them to deepen their relationship with Christ." (p.65)

We want to transition the role of the church from spiritual parent to spiritual coach. When you go to the gym to get physically fit, a trainer often assesses your current strengths and weaknesses. Based on that assessment, the trainer prescribes a personalized workout plan. If you are really unfit, or at the beginning of your 'physical fitness journey,' there are certain things you should do. Then, as you grow stronger and advance in your abilities, you begin to do different things. There is no 'one-size-fits' all plan. Similarly, there is no one-size-fits-all spiritual growth plan....

...(everyone needs to) assess the current state of their relationship with Christ ('spiritual fitness') and then to recommend a customized growth or 'workout' plan that provides direction for their next step spiritually. We believe it is essential for us to help everyone answer the question, 'What's next for me?' (pp. 65-66)

9. **Change the Conversation** – go beyond asking “How are you?”

Comments from *Reveal, the Willow Creek Study* by Greg Hawkins & Cally Parkinson:

Go beyond “How are you?”

- “How is your relationship with God?”
- “What’s helping you grow spiritually these days?”
- “What ministry is making a difference in your life?” “How?”
- “What could the church do differently that would help you grow more?”
- “How does that help someone grow?”



God put a call on your heart to make a difference in the lives of people he loves—people he desires to grow even closer to him. I encourage you to ask God to REVEAL to you what he wants to do in your church....Then get ready to answer the question God has been asking from the beginning of time: “Where are you?” (p.76)

10. A “**Spiritual Growth Learning Curve**” is not linear. Spiritual growth is a highly individual process, a work of the Holy Spirit, full of mysterious movements that crystallize and catalyze our faith. There’s no clear pattern of stepping stones to guarantee spiritual maturity. Yet, some general pathways are helpful to many people, which can help us create growth environments and experiences to help many grow.

Comments from *Follow Me, the Willow Creek Study* by Greg Hawkins & Cally Parkinson:

People grow spiritually through multiple inputs – from teaching and study, to spiritual coaching and everyday spiritual experiences. “Predictability” refers to the combination of factors that most often cause a certain outcome. When we say certain spiritual factors are “more predictive” than others, it means that when such factors are present, spiritual growth is more likely to occur. When it comes to identifying and ranking factors that catalyze spiritual growth, we’re looking for the spiritual equivalent of vanilla. Vanilla-type factors deserve attention and resources because they represent spiritual catalysts that have greater power and influence than others – the kind of catalysts with the potential for exponential impact on spiritual growth. (pp. 47-48)

How does spiritual growth happen? How do we help people move toward a more intimate and committed relationship to Christ? We examine four powerful categories of spiritual catalysts that inspire growth across the spiritual continuum. (p.24)

11. “Stages of Faith” – another way to look at spiritual growth and maturity

Comments from *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero (pp. 119–120):

Stage 1: Life-Changing awareness of God – This is the beginning of our journey with Christ as we become aware of his reality. We realize our need for mercy and begin our relationship with him.

Stage 2: Discipleship – This stage is characterized by learning about God and what it means to be a follower of Christ. We become part of the Christian community and begin to get rooted in the disciplines of faith.

Stage 3: The Active Life – This is described as the ‘doing’ stage. We get involved, actively working for God, serving him and his people. We take responsibility to bring our unique gifts to serve Christ and others.

Stage 4: The Wall and the Journey Inward – Notice the wall and the inward journey are closely related. The wall compels us into an inward journey. In some cases the inward journey eventually leads us to the wall. Most importantly, remember it is God who brings us to the wall.

Stage 5: The Journey Outward – Having passed through the crisis of faith and the intense inner journey necessary to go through the Wall, we begin once again to move outward to ‘do’ for God. We may do some of the same active external things we did before. The difference is that now we give out of a new, grounded center of ourselves in God. We have rediscovered God’s profound, deep, accepting love for us. A deep, inner stillness now begins to characterize our work for God.

Stage 6: Transformed by Love – God continually sends events, circumstances, people, and even books into our lives to keep us moving forward on our journeys. He is determined to complete the work he began in us, whether we like it or not! His goal, is the language of John Wesley, that we be made perfect in love, that Christ’s love becomes our love both toward God and others. We realize love truly is the beginning and the end. By this stage, the perfect love of God has driven out all fear (1 Jn 4:18). And the whole of our spiritual lives is finally about surrender and obedience to God’s perfect will.

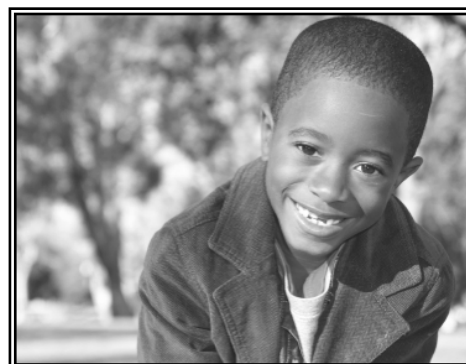
12. No spiritual health and maturity without emotional health and maturity

Comments from *The Emotionally Healthy Church* by Peter Scazzero:

Despite all the emphasis today on spiritual formation, church leaders rarely address what spiritual maturity looks like as it relates to emotional health, especially as it relates to how we love other people. The link between emotional health and spiritual maturity is a large, unexplored area of discipleship. (p.18)

I believe the thesis of this book—**that emotional health and spiritual health are inseparable**—will amount to a Copernican revolution for many in the Christian community. **It is not possible for a Christian to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.** (p.50)

The Gospel says you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, yet you are more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope because Jesus lived and died in your place. A great exchange takes place when we place our trust and faith in Jesus Christ. ‘God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21). (p.81)



...the proof of spiritual maturity is not how ‘pure’ you are but awareness of your impurity. The very awareness opens the door to grace.

**--Philip Yancey, *What Is So Amazing About Grace*
(p. 198)**

13. Huge problems of emotional hurt and immaturity in our churches and the Evangelical community.

Comments from *The Emotionally Healthy Church* by Peter Scazzero:

Many are supposedly 'spiritually mature' but remain infants, children, or teenagers emotionally. They demonstrate little ability to process anger, sadness, or hurt. They whine, complain, distance themselves, blame, and use sarcasm—like little children when they don't get their way. Highly defensive to criticism or differences of opinion, they expect to be taken care of and often treat people as objects to meet their needs. (p.18)

I remember my early days...stunned by the inner lives of many leaders and pastors of our churches. All too common were denial, pride, defensiveness, frantic schedules, workaholism, covetousness for higher impact churches, and a trail of lonely spouses. It felt like too much to bear. In the early days, I believed it was simply an aberration, a rare occurrence. Over time, however, I realized it was the norm. (p.43)

The emotional stability of American homes is at an all-time low. (p.43)

14. A goal of spiritual and emotional maturity is to love others well. A model for loving others well is The Incarnation.

Comments from *The Emotionally Healthy Church* by Peter Scazzero:

But unless we integrate emotional maturity with a focus on loving well into our discipleship, we are in danger of missing God's point completely—love. (p.19)

In emotionally healthy churches, people intentionally follow the model of Jesus. They learn to follow the three dynamics of incarnation found in the life of Jesus in order to love other people: entering another's world, holding on to yourself, and hanging between two worlds. (p.172)

God invaded our planet and forever changed it. God became incarnate. He took on human flesh in a way that is shocking, concrete, raw and physically tangible. God knew there was no better way to show human beings than by fully entering their world—physically and emotionally. (p.174)

...Henri Nouwen articulated, I believe, the struggle for many of us who are responsible to lead and serve in God's church. One voice says to succeed and achieve. It is the voice Nouwen says he spent most of his life heeding. He taught at Notre Dame, Harvard, and Yale. He averaged writing more than a book a year. His speaking schedule and ministry constantly threatened to suffocate his spiritual life. The other voice was God's telling him he was unconditionally loved. He had nothing to prove. This voice told him the goal of ministry was to recognize the Lord's voice, his face, and his touch in every person he met. Only in the last ten years of his life, he said did he truly listen to that second voice. (p.177)

The sign of the Spirit at work is supernatural love, not gifts or successful results. This love requires a supernatural world of grace in the heart. (p.192)

3 John 1:2-4 – Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. ³ It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Folder: Finishing Well / File: What is Spiritual Maturity