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# BECOME

like  
Jesus

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Regaining Clarity on Transformation in the Local Church

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WILLOW

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# Introduction

When you hear the word “country,” what comes to mind? Do you picture a pasture of cows grazing in a field? Or do you sing along to the latest Rascal Flatts’ song? Perhaps you envision an actual mass of land that you’d like to someday visit. Funny how the same word offers different realities.

What if I said the word “church”? Is your first thought around a service, like “What time is church on Sunday?”

Or ...

Is church a building? Is it the building over on Main Street?

Or ...

Is church comprised of a staff, pastor and a particular organizational chart? Do people notice and ask, “Hey, look at what that church is doing!”

Or ...

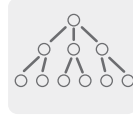
Do you think of the local church as *ecclesia*, the called out ones, a worshipping group of people, meaningfully connected in a local setting, with God at their center? Those who are bringing the presence and activity of Jesus to their community?

By virtue of habit, most often we tend to think of the first three meanings of “church”: “I drive to church.” “I attend a church.” “I work for (or at) a church.” Likewise, we often evaluate: “Church was good today!” “I like that church.” “That’s an innovative, or traditional, or a leadership-oriented church.” But those are not the real the church.

How can we tell? If we canceled every service, the building burned to the ground, and the entire staff quit, we’d still have church, the *ecclesia*. People would still gather to care for one another, pray and connect with each other. The *ecclesia* would continue to move toward God together, and be salt and light to the community around them (Matthew 6).

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9:00  
10:30



When we wonder about that definition of church, and ask “How is our ecclesia doing,” the answer is more difficult to discern. Yet it remains an important question, one that leaders will be held accountable for by God.

So how can we, as leaders, help the local church be more effective in causing that fourth definition of church to flourish and grow? How do we help people discover and deepen life in that community with God at its center? As part of this vibrant community, what can we expect to be happening in the lives of those involved?

Answers to those questions will be impacted by our view of the human soul.

### **Member of the Ecclesia. A Closer Look at the Soul...**

Who are these members of the ecclesia? They are the community of the redeemed. Their souls are “saved,” for sure. What does that mean, exactly? What does that mean for transformation?

When we think about our soul, we should consider it in the context of our whole personhood.

Philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard explains:

*What is running your life at any given moment is your soul. Not external circumstances, or your thoughts, or your intentions, or even your feelings, but your soul. The soul is that aspect of your whole being that correlates, integrates, and enlivens everything going on in the various dimensions of the self. It is the life-center of the human being.<sup>1</sup>*

Sometimes Christians tend to think of the soul only with reference to whether or not it is “saved” or “born again” or “heaven-bound.” And while the eternal destiny of a soul is of utmost urgency, something else is quite true about souls, and vitally important in the here and now: Souls are living.

The Old Testament Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*. The Scriptures use this word when God formed Adam out of dust in Genesis 2:7. God breathed into Adam, and Adam came to life, a “living being”—a *nephesh*.

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In the New Testament, the Greek word for soul, *psuche*, is also translated as life. One's soul and one's life are woven together.

As believers in Christ, our souls have been brought to new life—regeneration has begun (Ephesians 2). The integrated soul is driving everything about that life. And so, like all living things, our souls can flourish or they can be diminished. When we pay attention to the health of our own soul and discover (experience) ways for it to grow. We gradually and naturally become the kind of people who can live as Jesus would in our context. Transformation happens.

This alone explains the redemptive power and potential of the ecclesia.

### **What Might We Become? A New Lens**

We need to start our exploration of this topic with a broad view of the church as the ecclesia, made up of redeemed living souls. Perhaps in the past we've presented an accurate, but incomplete picture of church and what—exactly—we're inviting people into, as followers, or disciples of Jesus. We've often minimized the spiritual dynamics at work in a redeemed soul. Perhaps these are clues to some frustration felt in recent years. What could happen if that began to shift? What might become of us?

My prayer for this book is that we might view “church” and “soul” and the relationship between them in a new way. We want our efforts as leaders to serve God's purposes in this world, to indeed bear fruit: as we seek the lost, search after the strays, bind up the injured, heal the wounded, strengthen the weak, and provide spiritual nourishment (Ezekiel 34).

We want to become, as individuals and as a community, those who are capable of participating in God's work here on earth.

I love imagining: What might we become?

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# CHAPTER 1: The Hope of Becoming

Promises of transformation surround us. Television ads market the latest anti-wrinkle cream with guaranteed results in just two days. If you want a beach-ready body in no time, you'll find the newest ab machine on late-night infomercials. We can cover the grey, lose a few inches and simplify our lives—often in three quick steps. If only transformation was that easy. We long for improvement. We long to shed the emptiness and the ordinariness of our lives for beauty, fulfillment and meaning.

The hope of becoming something new and improved fuels entire industries: executive coaching, management consulting, health clubs, and “aesthetic surgery” clinics.

As Christ-followers, our hope grows even more profound. We hope to become something new and improved where it matters most—on the inside. We want to fulfill our potential and become all that God created us to be. We feel both the desire and the responsibility to reflect the character of Christ in our world.

And if we have been called by God to some realm of influence in the church, we also bear some responsibility for this internal development in other's lives.

The good news is: It's possible. Maybe not in three easy steps, or for \$250 per month, but true lasting transformation is a very real hope. God promises, and is already

at work to accomplish, just such a transformation within His followers. We can be confident of this: *“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 1:6).

But what path should we take as we attempt to traverse the gap between who we are right now and the person we might become? As church leaders, how can we best help those we lead to become more like Christ?

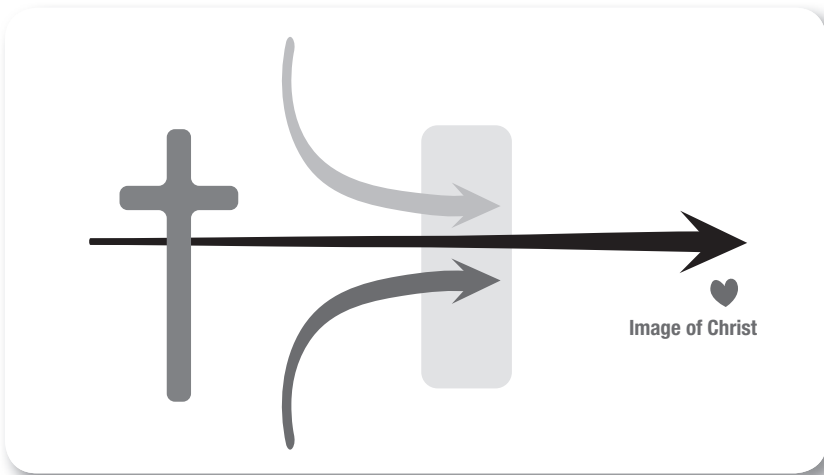
**Spiritual Formation, Discipleship and Transformation: What Do They All Mean?**

Many terms have been associated with this *process of becoming* in the soul of one who is “in Christ.” You’ve likely heard these: sanctification, transformation, discipleship, and even spiritual formation. While they may have come to mean slightly different things within various ministries or church traditions, I find it helpful to think of them as essentially similar. They all speak to the process by which a human soul, following the way of Jesus, is being re-shaped at the core of their being, in a direction that reflects the character of God.

What would that look like? Being shaped that way on the interior? Bill Hybels, Senior Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, gives great language to this when he speaks of the “Law of Spiritual Formation.” It is during which that we are formed in the image of Christ, so that we would begin to naturally *“love the things that God loves, disdain the things that God would disdain, have compassion on that which God has compassion, and so on...”*<sup>1</sup>

Dallas Willard defines it this way: *“Spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself.”*<sup>2</sup>

The diagram below is a simple, but hopefully not simplistic, way of depicting this process of becoming.



- The main horizontal line simply symbolizes a human soul changing over time. We don't sign up for that process; it's a fact of being human! Think of it this way: Human beings are highly malleable. We are *always* becoming a certain kind of person.
- The cross lines represent the beginning of a soul's relationship with God through the person of Jesus. When grace invades a human soul, everything changes! The former darkness turns to light, the soul has gone from death to life (Ephesians 2).

Prior to entering into a relationship with God through the redemptive work of Christ, the soul's transformation is random. It is not necessarily focused on a specific goal or outcome. Once grace has infused this soul, a few new things can be said of the process of transformation in the life of someone who is "in Christ" (Ephesians 1).

- The arrowhead at the right end of the horizontal line reflects the direction in which someone "in Christ" is becoming. The soul is being formed into the image of Christ (Galatians 4:19). It is a process. Over time, that seed of grace transforms us.
- The curved arrow swooping downward from above shows the indwelling activity of the Holy Spirit. He is exerting energy in this process of transformation (Philippians 1:6).
- The curved arrow swooping upward shows the energy the individual exerts towards that same goal of transformation (Philippians 2:12). There is significant effort we expend as God's character is pressed through our DNA—not to work for our salvation, but to work out our salvation. But while God's activity is constant, our awareness of and responsiveness to God's activity fluctuates, thus limiting our openness to new growth.
- The large vertical rectangle brings together this ongoing activity of God and our own efforts. It represents the role of spiritual practices in the life of someone who is "in Christ." We become aware and responsive to the work of God in our life as we regularly connect with Him. That's why spiritual practices are so important as a way to keep our soul open and yielded.

Broadly defined, a spiritual practice is anything we are intentional about doing, to become aware of and responsive to this ongoing work of God in our lives. (We'll talk more about spiritual practices in Chapter 8.)

So whether you call it spiritual formation, or transformation, or discipleship, or even sanctification, this process is at work in those who are redeemed (Galatians 4:19). And it matters that they traverse this journey, and that they do so in the context of a vibrant community. Together, they are the ecclesia.

This entire journey is represented in Jesus' mandate to His followers. His final words of sending—of commissioning—His followers were:

*"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28: 19 – 20).*

While many leaders might think of this passage as Jesus' mandate for evangelism, it expresses His expectation of the whole journey. Not merely converts, but disciples. Conversion is the first step in becoming a disciple.

Perhaps Willard best describes what we want to build and offer to those we lead: "*Fortunate or blessed are those who are able to find or are **given a path of life** that will form their spirit and inner world in a way that is truly strong and good and directed Godward*" (emphasis mine).<sup>3</sup>

### **A Path Big Enough to Include the Whole Journey**

I'm from the Northeastern part of the U.S., a place where roads and highways are generally named for what they are: the Mass Turnpike, the New York State Thruway, the Long Island Expressway.

But now I live near Chicago. And while streets here tend to be more organized and better marked than in New England (no cow-paths-turned-superhighways or evasive signage just to confuse visitors), there is one notable exception: the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway. You see, I've discovered since moving here that the Elgin-O'Hare Expressway goes neither to Elgin nor O'Hare.

I've looked into it. The vision for the highway was clear. Government leaders and city planners had a grand vision to join the western suburbs of Chicago as far west as Elgin with the O'Hare International Airport. Somehow that goal got lost along the way. It really should be called the Hanover Park-Itasca Expressway. That doesn't exactly roll off the tongue.

“ Conversion is the first step in becoming a disciple. ”

Obviously, people still make the journey between O'Hare and Elgin. Thousands of drivers every day actually use the completed portion to get where they're going.

Recently, as I entered the ramp to the ill-named expressway, I felt a pang of conviction. Almost every ministry I've ever been involved with or helped launch began with a clear and well-articulated vision.

In every case, on one end we wanted to reach the lost and at the other end of the spectrum, we wanted to nurture believers into mature disciples. We wanted to obey Jesus' command in Matthew 28. But I've come to realize that while the roads we've built do serve *most* people on *part* of that journey, oftentimes we never really reach either end.

Just like that part of the Illinois highway system, people obviously still move from being deeply irreligious to becoming fully devoted followers. The question becomes, are our pathways helping?

## The Ecclesia at Its Best

A dramatic shift has happened in just one generation to reclaim the church's vital role in reaching the lost. No longer ignored, or left to the realm of para-church organizations, the church has, by and large, rightly focused considerable efforts on evangelism—with tremendous impact!

Efforts to be more relevant, to communicate more clearly, and to intentionally reach beyond the comfort zone of the “holy huddle” have fueled much of the true success and effectiveness of modern mega-churches and missionally-minded efforts. In many places we've built a highway starting right at the O'Hare International Airport! Constant new efforts and creative ways should be explored, but by and large *we get it*.

But more and more church leaders around the world are wondering if their effectiveness in making disciples, not merely converts, has not been as strong as it could be and should be. The on-ramps, signage, and pavement for the rest of the journey have been only partially completed, or even left undone.

## Leading for Transformation

For the past few years, I've been honored to share in strategic conversations at the Willow Creek Association about Jesus' mandate in Matthew 28:19-20. We've been asking, *how might we help local churches become even more effective in carrying out **ALL** of Matthew 28?*

In the past, it would have been nearly impossible to assess how effectively a church was supporting this entire spiritual journey in the lives of its people.

Cally Parkinson, the church consultant and co-author of REVEAL, offers this insight:

*Since the birth of the Christian church two thousand years ago, we have judged our ability to help people grow by asking, in essence, one question: How many?*

*How many decisions for Christ? How many baptisms? How many attend our weekend services, small groups and Bible classes? How many volunteers? How many tithe?*

*But “how many”—by itself—doesn't completely address what the church is called to do. That question is a good start, but it measures only what we can see.*

*When it comes to spiritual growth, we need to be able to measure the unseen. We need a glimpse of people's attitudes, thoughts and feelings. We need words that reveal their hearts for God and for others.*

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*We need a fresh view. We need another question—one that helps us understand the spiritual journey so we can help and encourage people in their pursuit of Christ.*

*The question is simple: It's the central question between God and us. And God was the first one to ask it (in Genesis 3:9): Where are you?*

*The health of your church is not about the numbers. It's about the movement of your people toward Christ, toward deep love of God and genuine love for others.<sup>5</sup>*

Converts might be “counted,” but how could we know if an entire group of people was more like Christ, and how could we know if our church’s efforts had helped in that regard? We relied on conjecture, anecdotal stories, or conventional measures of “ministry effectiveness.”

The ground-breaking research published in REVEAL (Cally Parkinson and Greg Hawkins) has finally given us a new lens to “see” into this elusive world of the ecclesia.

Through research with over 1,000 churches and 250,000 individuals, it has been found that everyone is on a spiritual journey to some degree and God is the leader of each of those journeys. Spiritual growth “*is not linear or predictable. It is a complex process as unique as each individual, and it progresses at a pace determined by each person’s circumstances and the activity of the Holy Spirit.*”<sup>4</sup> The REVEAL research, which we will explore more fully in Chapters 2 and 8, offered new insights into the spiritual journey, and new data to help church leaders see how effectively they are helping their congregation traverse this journey.

I’m not suggesting we develop a mechanical conveyor belt of programs at churches that move people automatically from pre-baptism towards maturity. That would be entirely incongruous with the mystery and ongoing process of an authentic spiritual life.

We must ask, is there more we can do to increase our effectiveness? How might the leadership of a local church lead in such a way that it truly extends a path of life comprehensive enough to encompass those far from God and those who are fully surrendered “in Christ”?

This is an important question because leaders have been entrusted with a unique role in shaping the future of the local church. They have to lead.

### **Whose Job Is It?**

*“. . . if [your spiritual gift] is to lead, do it diligently” (Romans 12:8).*

Bill Hybels often talks about this verse at the annual Global Leadership Summit held at Willow Creek Community Church:

*Romans 12:8 tells those of us who have the gift of leadership that we had better sit up and take notice, we had better “lead with diligence.” Why? Because the Church, the bride of Christ, upon which the eternal destiny of the world depends, will flourish or falter largely on the basis of how we lead. My ultimate concern is not leadership. For me, the bottom line is the Acts 2 church. But I am absolutely convinced that the church will never reach her full redemptive potential until men and women with the leadership gift step up and lead.<sup>6</sup>*

If you are reading this, chances are you are actively involved in some part of the process. Perhaps you’re even a senior leader, assuming significant accountability for the whole. Whatever your role, it matters that you lead. It matters that you lead with diligence. It matters that you lead with a clear eye to what is really going on as human souls receive the invitation to new life in Christ, and then traverse an entire journey of transformation in the context of your ecclesia.

What new pathways might need to be created and what will be your strategy for helping your congregation move along this path? Who will cast the vision for the entire journey? How will your community reach out to the lost, to the strays? Who will teach the “found” the critical truths and practices necessary for maturity in Christ? What ought to be true of the inner life of leaders and teams in order to create environments conducive to growth?

Before we explore actual strategies and a framework for taking next steps, let’s explore more specifically what current research (primarily in the United States) tells us about the spiritual vitality of the church. As we move “from here to there,” we need to really understand where we *are*, both in the Christian community at large as well as in local congregations.

So let’s take a look at a few indicators of the condition of the church.