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# Leadership

## Your Spiritual Growth Plan

*Developing life in the Spirit is a customized process.*

John Ortberg

Monday, March 22, 2010

**A** man I'll call Paul (because that's actually his name) told me he recently started going to church. In his mid-seventies, with no faith background, he woke up one morning with a sudden urge to hear the pope, and that launched him on a journey that led a few months later to a Presbyterian church and then to a commitment to follow Jesus. Every week he comes to church and marvels at all he gets to learn about prayer and worship and faith.

A man I'll call Ralph (not his real name) told me recently how he stopped going to church. I have known him for decades. He is a well-known pastor and speaker. He still believes in God. He meets with some like-minded friends on Sunday evening to talk and pray together. But he got burned out on the local church—it came to feel to him like a relentless drive for numbers and success and program and hype. He told me that the people in his little house group are long-time church people, most of them former church staff members.

Paul and Ralph exemplify a dynamic just beneath the surface in many churches. People who are new to the church often grow the quickest and appreciate it the most. But people who have been around a while, those who know the church best and have served the longest, often feel the least helped and the most used.

This was confirmed by the Reveal study. It found that at a certain point of spiritual development, increased involvement in church activities ceases to correlate to perceived spiritual growth.

*So You Don't Want to Go to Church Anymore* became a best-seller and launched a national conversation. David Kinnaman released a study from the Barna Group that found that most people believed spiritual growth consists of trying hard to follow the rules in the Bible, which meant that people said (not surprisingly) they don't grow because they lack motivation.

Those of us who work in churches do it because we believe in the power of God to

change lives: "we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ" ([Eph. 3:15](#)).

When that does not happen, we begin to die a little, even if the church is increasing numerically. Of course, we can't make growth happen. But just as doctors do with children when their growth is stunted, we can look for the conditions that lead best to growth, and ask if they're present in our churches. I'm thinking a lot these days about why many churches aren't growth-nurturing communities. Often it's the wrong message, the wrong measure, and the wrong means.

The right message

Jesus made staggering promises about his ability to transform human lives:

"'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flowing from within.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive" ([John 7:37-39](#)).

This life is not something we produce; it exists independently of us. It is the Spirit of God.

Often people are moved by the vision of Jesus, are overwhelmed by the hope and beauty of his promise, and they say yes to it. For a time, there's a kind of a spiritual honeymoon period. They're filled with love for God, and they're drawn to the Bible. And some things change. Maybe coarse language gets cleaned up. Maybe certain habits get overcome.

But over time this sense of progress stalls out. People find themselves wrestling with patterns of anger, or sexual addictions, or chronic anxiety that are embedded too deeply in their bodies to be lifted out simply through hearing more information. And they get stuck in a gap.

When they first hear the gospel, they're aware of the gap between them and God caused by sin. And they come to understand that human effort cannot bridge that gap; it can only be bridged by grace.

But over time they become aware of another gap: the gap between who I am right now and the person God wants me to become.

People think they are supposed to bridge that gap by trying harder.

You hear about someone who gets up at four o'clock in the morning to pray, and you feel guilty because you think you don't pray enough. So you resolve to do that too, even though you're not a morning person, even though at four in the morning you're dazed and confused and groggy and grumpy, and no one wants to be around you at four in the morning. Even Jesus doesn't want to be around you at four in the morning!

But you think, *Well, this is exhausting and miserable—I certainly don't like doing it—so it must be God's will for my life. It must be spiritual.* You keep it up for several days or

weeks, but not forever. Eventually you stop. Then you feel guilty. After enough guilt, you start doing something else.

It leads to a cycle: I feel guilty, so I try harder to do some devotional practice, but eventually I get fatigued, and eventually I quit, and after a while I feel guilty about quitting, and the whole cycle starts again.

We teach people how to be saved by grace.

But we often do not teach people how to live by grace.

Self-improvement is no more God's plan than is self-salvation. God's plan is not just for us to be saved by grace—it is for us to live by grace. God's plan is for my daily life to be given, guided, guarded, and energized by the grace of God. To live in grace is to flow in the Spirit.

This is largely a matter of teaching. I try on a regular basis to communicate this to our congregation: the only way to become the person God made you to be is to live with the Spirit of God flowing through you like a river of living water.

The more my habits are formed around resentment or anxiety or greed or superiority, the more often I will quench the Spirit. It will take time and wisdom for habits to get re-formed. But the Spirit of God is tenacious. All that is needed in any moment is a sincere desire to be submitted to the Spirit's leading. We need not worry about God's response; a sincere heart never needs to fear God is mad.

I was traveling on obscure back roads in a part of the country I had never been to before, so when I got a rental car the man at the counter recommended a GPS unit.

My immediate response was, "No. I'm not going to pay for that. I can find where I'm going without that."

But when I went out to parking lot, I could not find the stall my car was in. I had to go back to the counter and tell the man I got lost before I found my car.

I decided to get the GPS.

There was a voice coming out of that box. You don't even have to look at a screen or follow a map. Someone talks to you. It is a British voice, because people who talk with a British accent always sound smarter. You're just inclined to do what they say. And it was a woman's voice, because ... same thing.

You can get the box. You can hear the lady's voice. But that doesn't mean you trust her. If you trust her, you do what she says. If she says, "Turn left," you turn left. If she says, "Turn left," and in your heart you think, *Oh, I think I need to turn right*, you remember that verse, "There is a way that seemeth right unto man, but the end thereof is death."

To live in the flow of the Spirit means doing what Jesus says. I will mess up a lot. I'm going to need his power. I know that, but I form the intention. I say to him, "God, with your help, as best I can, I will do what you say. I will give you my life, my time, my

obedience." If that is not my settled intent, then it is best to be honest about it.

There is something else you need to know. At one point when we were driving, I was quite sure the lady was wrong. She said to go left, and I didn't go left. I went right because I knew she was wrong. Then, in a fascinating response, she said, "Recalculating route. When safe to do so, execute a U-turn."

I knew she was wrong ... so I unplugged her. That's the beauty of that little box. You can unplug her.

And I got lost as a goose, which my wife enjoyed immensely. So we plugged that lady back in, and you know what she said?

"I told you so, you little idiot. You think I'm going to help you now? You rejected me. There is no way. You just find your way home by yourself."

No, she didn't say those things. She said, "Recalculating route. When safe to do so, execute a U-turn."

That's grace.

God will say to anybody: "Here is the way home. Execute a U-turn." As soon as you're ready to listen, as soon as you're ready to surrender, that's called repentance.

He'll say, "I'll bring you home." That is grace.

The right message is not simply how to get to heaven when you die. Nor is it simply human wisdom about how to be a better parent or more successful at work. The right message is that we grow to desire and follow God's Spirit each day of our life.

The right measure

It is a leadership axiom that we will seek to measure that which we are serious about. The default measures at a church are nickels and noses because, by definition, if we run out of those, I'm out of a job. But most of us want to go deeper than that. We'd like a sense of how we are doing at creating communities where saints can flourish. And we need to get our gauges as right as possible.

When I was growing up, if someone asked me, "How is your spiritual life going?" my mind immediately went to what we called "the quiet time." If my quiet times were regular and long, I would rate my spiritual life highly. I rated my spiritual life in terms of my devotional practice.

Churches sometimes do the same thing. In an attempt to take spiritual growth seriously, they may try to calculate how many people are reading the Bible or writing in a journal.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. But devotional practices are not the ultimate criteria for spiritual growth. In Jesus' day, the people who would have rated highest on devotional practices would have been the scribes and the Pharisees ("I thank you, God ... that I fast twice a week; I give tithes on all I get"). But they were not examples of

spiritual maturity.

How do you measure spiritual maturity so that the Pharisees don't win?

Sometimes churches measure spiritual progress in terms of commitment. Often we see scales that look something like Scale 1 (below). Where would the Pharisees be by this scale? Far right. They win. Commitment was not the problem.

But consider another possibility. Jesus said the ultimate command was to love. So imagine another scale. See Scale 2.

On the second scale, Jesus would put the Pharisees at the far left.

Commitment is not the same thing as Christlikeness. In fact, where people's primary focus is on their commitment, pride is not far behind. Where the primary focus is on Christ, commitment no longer seems like such a heroic thing. It just seems sane.

When I realized that devotional practices were not the best measure, I once asked Dallas Willard how he monitored the condition of his soul. His immediate response was that he regularly asks himself two questions:

—Am I growing more or less easily irritated these days?

—Am I growing more or less easily discouraged these days?

Gauging peoples' involvement in activities like small groups and serving is surely a good thing. But we need to give them a deeper way of looking at the well-being of their souls.

And because we all live in our own blind spots, it is enormously helpful to find a way to have relationships where other people can help me see those parts of my soul that are obvious to others and opaque to me.

**Scale 1:**

Atheist  
Skeptic  
Seeker  
Convert  
New Believer  
Growing Disciple  
Totally Committed

**Scale 2:**

Selfishly Unloving  
Radiantly Loving

The right means

Many approaches to spiritual growth assume the same methods will produce the same growth in different people—but they don't. Because you have been created by God as a unique person, his plan to grow you will not look the same as his plan to grow anyone

else. What would grow an orchid would drown a cactus. What would feed a mouse would starve an elephant. They all need light, food, air, and water—but in different amounts and conditions. The key is not treating every creature alike; it's finding the unique conditions that help each creature grow.

Imagine a doctor's office where every patient is told, "Take two aspirin." Imagine a parent who thinks, I will treat all of my children exactly the same way. They will all be motivated by the same rewards, impacted by punishment the same way, and attracted by the same activities.

If we really want to help someone flourish, we have to help them in a way that fits their uniqueness.

Our great model for this is God himself, for he always knows just what each person needs.

He had Abraham take a walk,  
Elijah take a nap,  
Joshua take a lap,  
Adam take the rap.

He gave Moses a 40-year timeout,  
He gave David a harp and a dance,  
He gave Paul a pen and a scroll.

He wrestled with Jacob,  
argued with Job,  
whispered to Elijah,  
warned Cain,  
and comforted Hagar.

He gave Aaron an altar,  
Miriam a song,  
Gideon a fleece,  
Peter a name,  
and Elisha a mantle.

Jesus was stern with the rich young ruler,  
tender with the woman caught in adultery,  
patient with the disciples,  
blistering with the scribes,  
gentle with the children,  
and gracious with the thief on the cross.

God never grows two people the exact same way. God is a hand-crafter, not a mass-producer.

The problem many people face when it comes to spiritual growth is that they listen to someone they think of as the expert—maybe an author or radio personality—talk about

what he does and they think that's what they're supposed to do. When it doesn't work for them (because they are a different person!) they feel guilty and inadequate, and often give up.

God has a plan for the me he wants me to be. It will not look exactly like his plan for anyone else, which means it will take freedom and exploration for you to learn how God wants to grow you. Spiritual growth is hand-crafted, not mass-produced. God does not do "one-size-fits-all."

Take the practice of writing in a journal, for example. I once mentioned journaling while speaking at a conference on spiritual life and heard groans. So I asked, "How many people do not like to journal?" What amazed me was not just how many hands were raised (the vast majority). What amazed me was the speed and vehemence with which the hands were thrust into the air. I have repeated this often, always with the same results—once even at a workshop on journaling!

If you don't like to keep a journal, here's a thought you might like: Jesus never journaled. Neither did Abraham or Moses or Ruth. Throughout most of the history of the human race people loved God without ever picking up a paper and pencil.

In fact, in those days most didn't have supplies to journal. Yet people still grew spiritually, examined their souls, fought sin, and learned obedience without journaling.

C. S. Lewis, one of the most influential Christians of the twentieth century, said that he kept a journal until he was converted. Then when he became a Christian, he realized that it was making him preoccupied with himself. So he stopped journaling.

Of course, if keeping a journal helps someone become more aware of God's presence, let them journal. But it's not for everyone. We learn differently, struggle with different sins, and relate to God in different ways.

When Jesus prayed for his disciples, he did not pray, "May they all have identical devotional practices." He prayed, "Father, may they be one with you." The main measure of devotion to God is not your devotional life. It's simply your life.

Trying to grow spiritually without taking who you are into account is like trying to raise children on an assembly line. If you train an 80-pound gymnast and a 300-pound linebacker exactly the same, you will end up with two, useless 190-pound people.

I'm currently involved with an effort, called Monvee, to help people figure out how to assess their temperament, their spiritual pathway, their learning style, their season of life, their signature sin—and find a concrete way to do life from Monday to Saturday that will help someone wired like them to be connected to God and continue to grow.

If you're looking for a conversation stopper, try asking people this question: How are your spiritual disciplines going? Most people think of a very short list of activities that fall in the "I ought to do this, but I don't do it as much as I should so it makes me feel guilty just thinking about it" category.

So here's an alternative question: What do you do that makes you feel fully alive?

Everybody knows what it's like to feel fully alive, and everybody longs for that.

Maybe you feel alive when taking a long walk at sunset.

Maybe it's reading a great book and taking time to savor its thoughts and language.

Maybe it's having a talk with lots of laughter in front of a fire with a few close friends.

Maybe it's watching a movie or a play that causes you to say yes to life.

Maybe it's taking a long drive.

Maybe you love to play an instrument.

Maybe you come alive when you're pursuing a hobby.

A spiritual discipline is simply an activity you engage in to be made more fully alive by the Spirit of Life.

Fully alive, fully surrendered

Spiritual disciplines are not self-improvement techniques. They are not activities I do for spiritual extra-credit. They are what John Wesley called "means of grace." In 12-step terms, they always involve letting go. The Bible's word for that is surrender.

They help me submit my will to the divine will. They are like a cord that plugs an otherwise inert appliance into a source of power. They connect me to a reality deeper and more powerful than myself. Ultimately, they connect me to Jesus. They help me access the life that flows only from him.

Henri Nouwen used to point out the connection between disciple and discipline. A discipline, he said, is something that creates space in our life. But it's not just space for space's sake. It's space for Christ. It points us in the Jesus' way.

Jesus often identified the particular area where surrender was needed in a person's life. To a woman caught in adultery he said, "I don't condemn you. Go and sin no more." To the rich young ruler, he said to sell everything he owned, give the money to the poor, then follow him.

But here again, we're never on our own. The Spirit is always available. Jesus himself knelt in a garden and prayed, "Let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done." And just as surrender led to resurrection for Jesus, so it does for his followers. The apostle Paul wrote, "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" ([Col. 3:3-4](#)).

My wife and I recently decided to take dancing lessons. I grew up Swedish and Baptist, and we were not a dancing people. I also went to a college where it was against the rules to dance. But I've been married 25 years, so I guess it's legal now.

We have a terrific instructor who, before we began, pulled us aside.

"I have a very important question," this instructor said. "You are going to dance now. Who leads?"

There was silence.

I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear my wife say it. A few more seconds of silence, and then through gritted teeth she said, "He leads."

"And who follows?"

Silence. Then, "I follow."

It was hard for her to follow for two reasons. One is when you aren't leading, you aren't in control. And it's hard not to be in control. The other is that when it comes to dancing, I'm a thoroughly incompetent leader.

Jesus, however, is a thoroughly competent leader. Life begins when a person whispers, "Jesus, today you lead, and I'll follow. Whatever I have to do in my relationships, my body, my health, and my finances are in your hands. I won't try to figure out the rest of my life. I won't try to solve every day. Just today. You lead. I'll follow."

The way to glory is through humbling. The only way to freedom is through submission. The way to victory is through surrender. The way to life is the Jesus way.

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