

INTRODUCTION TO GROWTH GROUPS

The Need for Spiritual Growth

Greg Ogden summarizes survey evidence that many American Christians lack a concrete and coherent approach to their spiritual growth, and most American churches fail to provide a clear pathway to spiritual growth for their members.

“In a survey about discipleship published in 2001, George Barna concluded that “most born-again adults are limited in their ability to grow spiritually because they have failed to set any goals for their spiritual development, failed to develop standards against which to measure their growth, or failed to establish procedures for being held accountable for their growth. Only four out of every ten church members responded that they had set personal spiritual growth goals for themselves. Even that figure is inflated, though, since many of the ‘goals’ are not measurable (that is, ‘to become a better Christian’ or ‘to grow spiritually’), not spiritual (that is, ‘to be a better person’), or not much of a stretch (that is, ‘to attend church services’). If we recalculate the statistics on the basis of people’s personal spiritual expectations, we find that six out of ten believers have no sense of what they want to achieve or become, and roughly two out of ten have only the vaguest idea of what they might like to achieve or become . . . It is intriguing that when Christians were asked to identify their spiritual goals, few believers mentioned more than one goal.”¹

“Relatively small numbers of born again adults said that their churches gives them the specific paths to follow to foster growth. Slightly less than half said their churches had identified any spiritual goals, standards or expectations for the congregation in the past year. . . . Only one out of every five believers stated that their church has some means of facilitating an evaluation of the spiritual maturity or commitment to maturity of their congregation.” However, *the good news is that “nine out of ten believers in this same survey said they would take seriously their church’s recommendation to pursue a spiritual path if one was presented to them”* (emphasis added).²

The Goal Defined

Spiritual growth is the process of growing in conformity to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29) by living in union with God the Father through Jesus Christ and his body, the church, by the Holy Spirit (John 15:1-11; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:1-22). The goals and results of spiritual growth are living a fully human life as renewed images of God (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24), loving God and neighbor (Matt. 22:37-40), making disciples (Matt. 28:18-20), and serving as faithful witnesses and agents of the gospel of Jesus' kingdom in all vocations and spheres of life (Acts 1:8; Col. 3:17, 23-24; 1 Pet. 4:10-11).

¹ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, rev. ed., (InterVarsity Press, 2016), pp. 36-37.

² Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, p. 55.

Jesus as the Model of Spiritual Growth

Jesus is the ultimate model for the church's ministry in several ways. First, Jesus himself is the ultimate exemplar of spiritual growth. Jesus is the perfect human being. He lives his whole life at every moment in perfect conformity to the will of God the Father with perfect worship, devotion, commitment, character, and obedience. Thus, he is the ultimate example for us to emulate and the ultimate teacher. Spiritual growth necessarily involves learning Christ's teaching and putting it into practice by following his example (Matt. 28:18-20; John 13:15; 1 Peter 2:21).

Second, Jesus is the source of spiritual growth. Jesus is both the God who gives and sustains all life (Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-4) and the resurrected, glorified man who is the source and beginning of the renewal of life for people bound by death in Adam (Rom. 5:12-6:11; 1 Cor. 15:20-58). People who are dead in sin can only be formed into the image of Christ via living union with Christ himself by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (John 15:1-11; Eph. 2:1-10). Apart from union and communion with God in Christ, there is no possibility of bearing the fruit of obedience and continual growth into the image of Christ.

Third, Jesus' pattern of ministry modeled the method of spiritual growth. Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom of God to crowds, and he and his disciples participated in the life and worship of the people of Israel. In addition, Jesus cultivated the spiritual growth of a few people through deep relationships. Churches follow the first aspect of Jesus' pattern by providing large- and medium-scale corporate environments for spiritual growth in corporate worship and various ministry groups. Churches should also follow the second aspect of Jesus' pattern, although it is a pattern too often neglected despite the amount of space and attention it receives in the gospel narratives of Jesus' ministry. By pursuing deep relationships with the Twelve, Jesus served in multiple personal ways as a living example, a provocative teacher, a supportive coach, and a skilled delegator.³

These methods were not reserved for the Twelve, however. Jesus taught his disciples to employ his methods in making disciples of the whole world (Matt. 28:18-20). Thus, spiritual growth fostered among small groups of committed friends and mentors is a model for all members of the church. It is not merely one phase of the Christian life for beginners or young Christians; rather, it is for all Christians at all times at all stages of life and spiritual growth. No Christian ever outlives the need for increasing conformity to the image of Christ.

The apostle Paul followed Jesus' command and pattern of ministry in his own labors as a church planter and pastor. Paul formed believers who responded to his evangelistic teaching into church communities, and he instructed Christians to be active participants in the life of the church family as a whole in corporate worship and service (e.g., 1 Cor. 11-14; 1 Tim. 2:1-7). Moreover, Paul cultivated especially close friendships and mentoring relationships with men who shared in his ministry (e.g., Barnabas, Silas, Epaphroditus, Luke, Timothy). For example, he describes Epaphroditus as "my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier" (Phil. 1:25), Titus

³ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, pp. 81-94.

as “our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters” who is “my partner and fellow worker” (2 Cor. 8:22-23), and Timothy as a “son,” “a true child in the faith,” “my beloved child” whose family and history he knew well (Phil. 1:22; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:1-7).

Furthermore, Paul did not intend for these sorts of close friendships to be the unique experience of apostles and pastors. Rather, he exhorted Christians to love one another deeply in ways that could only be accomplished in relationships with depth and closeness. For example, he instructs church members to “love one another with brotherly affection” (Rom. 12:10), to “show hospitality” (Rom. 12:13), to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2), to “bear with one another” (Col. 3:13), and to “put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14). Only Christians deeply involved in one another’s lives could merit these intimate descriptions and truly fulfill these commands.

The Necessary Components of Spiritual Growth

This analysis of Jesus’ and the apostles’ deeply personal and relational method of spiritual growth reveals several components that are essential for spiritual growth:⁴

1. Vision (Engaging the Head)

Jesus and the apostles *taught* about the kingdom of God that Jesus fulfilled in his life, death, and resurrection and embodied in the world through his church. Thus, acquiring a biblical vision of spiritual growth requires *instruction* in a biblically based understanding and vision of a Christ-like life. This can be done in a variety of ways, through classes and/or by study and discussion with small discipleship groups. Instruction primarily aims at imparting a *knowledge* of God, the church, oneself, and the world.

2. Intention (Engaging the Heart)

Jesus and the apostles aimed their teaching at the heart by exposing and challenging each person’s specific sins and calling people to respond by repenting, believing, and following Christ and the mission of his kingdom. Thus, a biblical vision of God and the world is only spiritually formative if it is joined with a personal *intention* to live according to this vision in practice. Without intention, vision remains merely abstract, intellectual knowledge. Forming a personal intention requires a personal *diagnosis* of one’s spiritual health and gifts and personal *commitments* to spiritual growth that include realistic but challenging *goals* for one’s own life and *plans* to achieve those goals.

3. Means (Engaging the Hands)

Jesus and the apostles taught and called people into relationships and practices that embodied the kingdom of God in action. Thus, a personal commitment to living a Christ-like life is only

⁴ For further exploration of the relationship vision, intention, and means, see Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (NavPress, 2002), 77–91.

spiritually formative if it results in the actions and habits that constitute a godly life. Without obedient actions, any personal decisions or commitments remain mere good intentions. Translating one's intention into action requires engaging in God's *means* of spiritual growth, i.e., the *practices* through which God works to form us by putting sins to death and putting on the character of Christ in the context of relationships with a *community* of fellow Christians who provide encouragement and support. The goals of engaging in these means are acquiring *skills* in the art of godly living and cultivating a godly *character* with godly *habits* of life.

Any approach to shepherding ministry must include all of these components in order to produce lasting spiritual change.

The Scope of Spiritual Growth: The Whole Gospel for the Whole Person

Spiritual growth must occur in every dimension of life. The mission of Jesus' kingdom is to conquer sin and all of its effects as far as the curse is found and to bring all of creation to its full maturity in glory. Thus, Jesus not only reconciles and heals our broken relationship with God but also our broken relationships with one another and with the rest of creation. He not only cleanses and changes our souls but also heals (and one day will resurrect) our physical bodies. He not only calls and leads us into activities of worship but also into health, holiness, and justice in the ways we work, rest, play, serve, and use all of the resources God has given us. Thus, the church must apply the whole gospel to whole persons by nurturing spiritual growth in all of the following dimensions of life:

1. Worship: Growing in connecting with God

Worship is growing in communion with God the Father through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. It is a relationship of love that we receive and cultivate by engaging in the embodied means and practices through which God relates with us, chiefly the word of God, the sacraments, and prayer. In addition to attending corporate worship each week, Christians must strive to develop good habits of daily personal prayer and engagement with the word of God with the goal of understanding God according to his revelation, receiving wisdom and guidance from God, and experiencing union and communion with God. All other dimensions of growth are based upon worship.

2. Body: Growing in physical health

Physical health is caring for our physical bodies as temples of God's Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) so that we have sufficient strength, flexibility, and energy to maximize our effectiveness in all of our activities. Christians must strive to develop good habits of eating, exercise, and sleep and to obtain good medical care. Christians must also be good stewards of our physical desires, especially powerful desires that can often tempt us to lusts and addictive behaviors of various kinds (e.g., food, sexual gratification, etc.).

3. Mind: Growing in knowledge

Intellectual growth is the development of the mind to think, reason, and discern truth consonant with the word of God in order to nurture godly beliefs and a Christ-honoring worldview that reflects biblical knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

4. Heart: Growing in character

Character growth is a process of growing in virtue by conforming to the character of Christ. It is revealed, tested, and strengthened by suffering life's challenges with persevering faith and hope within the loving community of God's people. Christians must strive to cultivate the virtues described as the blessed life (Matthew 5:3-12) and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) in their patterns of relating to themselves in their inner life and in their relationships with God and other people. This requires developing abilities to identify, understand, and express feelings and desires in constructive ways in order to reflect the character of Christ, and to recognize and heal from hurts, wounds, and bondages that stymie emotional health and maturity and impede the development of Christ-like character.

5. Relationships: Growing in connecting with others

Relational growth is growing in our social interaction with others in ways that reflect and embody God's love in order to promote the flourishing of others and ourselves in conformity to the image of Jesus. Christians must strive to devote sufficient time and develop the relational skills and practices required to cultivate close, healthy relationships with spouse (if applicable), children (if applicable), other family members, fellow church members, colleagues, and friends in every area of life. This dimension of life also includes learning how to share the gospel in the midst of friendships with non-Christian family and friends.

6. Work and Service: Growing in using gifts

Vocational growth is developing and employing God-given gifts, abilities, and skills in work that reflects the grace and glory of God and serves the needs of others with love. Christians must learn to see their education, talents, and skills as gifts of God and opportunities to serve our neighbors and the mission of God in all the forms of work that we do. This dimension includes not only paid work but also all other forms of service in the home, in the church, and in our communities. Christians should strive to develop our ability to serve God and our neighbor through ongoing study/education, training, and collaboration with colleagues and friends. In order to attend to other dimensions and responsibilities in life and to avoid the danger of working too much, Christians should also strive to work a reasonable number of hours per week and to make wise use of vacation time.

7. Wealth: Growing in using resources

Resource stewardship is the wise use of finances and material possessions in order to show love for God and neighbor. Christians must strive to develop good habits of planning and budgeting

the use of their financial and other material resources to support of the ministry of the church by tithing, to prepare for the future by saving, and to care for others by maintaining and sharing resources generously. Followers of Christ should also develop strategies to address substantial financial difficulties.

Principles for Structuring the Church's Ministry of Spiritual Growth

Jesus' methods of spiritual growth embody several principles that should guide the means employed by the church to nurture spiritual growth.

1. Spiritual growth requires multiple contexts and types of relationships.

Jesus served large crowds, and he also formed his followers into groups with different sizes, purposes, and levels of relational depth. He met with large groups of disciples (e.g., Matt. 5:1), and on one occasion commissioned seventy (or seventy-two) disciples to proclaim the kingdom throughout the land (Luke 10:1-12). On a smaller scale, Jesus cultivated special friendships with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Luke 11:38-42; John 11). He spent the majority of his time with his twelve primary disciples, but even within that group he had friendships of extra depth with just three (Peter, James, and John).

By analogy, the contexts of spiritual growth in the church are both broad and narrow, wide and deep.

- In the extended family of the *whole congregation*, we can engage in corporate worship, which provides us with a renewed vision of God and his kingdom and the experience of belonging to the congregation and to the larger body of Christ in the world.
- In the close family of various *smaller groups* (approx. 10-50), such as Sunday school communities, community groups, women's and men's ministries, etc., we can experience a deeper connection to the church community in groups where members share snapshots of each other's stories, develop friendships, and begin to share personally in each other's lives.
- With *just a few* brothers and sisters (2-4), we can experience deeper accountability and spiritual focus in groups that form intentional, spiritual friendships in order to encourage, equip, and exhort one another to grow toward maturity in Christ.

2. Spiritual growth requires the give-and-take of dialogue within personal relationships.

Although Jesus did deliver extended teaching in various settings, his strategy was not primarily like a class or program in a modern church. Jesus' approach to spiritual growth focused most heavily upon the personal conversation, questions, instruction, counsel, and shared ministry that occurred within highly committed relationships with a few others. Thus, in addition to the helpful teaching and connection that occurs in larger groups, the church must aim to cultivate an organic set of intentional relationships that becomes a growing relational network of formative friendships within the church.

3. *Spiritual growth must be sufficiently flexible to address different personal circumstances and capacities.*

Jesus' method of cultivating spiritual growth was not a mass production line. Instead, he adapted his methods to the capacities of his disciples, and dealt personally with the needs of each individual (e.g., John 21:15-23). Some churches attempt to accomplish spiritual growth primarily through a one-size-fits-all curriculum taught in a highly structured manner and timeframe. However, moving a large, diverse group of people through the same content in the same sequence at the same rate mostly results in large amounts of unprocessed information.

“Each disciple is a unique individual with growth factors particular to him or her. Unless people receive personal attention so that their precise growth needs are addressed in a way that calls them to die to self and live fully to Christ, disciples will not be formed.”⁵

While worship services, classes, curricula, and group studies all have a fruitful place in the church's macro-shepherding task, these large-group methods must be accompanied by a micro-shepherding method that adapts to the different life circumstances and stages of spiritual growth of individual members.

4. *Shepherding spiritual growth must be both directive and responsive.*

Jesus had specific goals for his disciples, and he was often *directive* in his interactions with them. He took the initiative to pose questions, to teach, to guide their travels, and to model life and ministry in the kingdom (e.g., Matthew 5-7). However, he was also *responsive* to the needs and questions of his disciples, e.g., their fear at a storm (Luke 8:22-25) or their arguments about being the greatest (Luke 9:46-48). Sometimes he took advantage of circumstances that he did not directly orchestrate as an occasion to nurture the faith of his friends, e.g., the death of Lazarus (John 11) or a need for food (Matt. 14:13-21). Thus, the church must create relational contexts for spiritual growth that are sufficiently flexible in their structure and format to be both directive toward defined goals and responsive to unexpected circumstances and needs that arise.

5. *The most personal contexts for spiritual growth must be sufficiently small to allow adequate time and trust.*

Spiritual growth requires reflection and discussion about the details of one's life at a deep level, and that cannot be done quickly. If the size of a group is too large to permit each member to talk regularly and at length about the state of his or her heart and life, then the formative impact of the group will decrease. Furthermore, spiritual growth requires great personal transparency, and it is impossible to achieve sufficient vulnerability without great trust in others. Since it is difficult to cultivate that trust with more than a small handful of people at a time, the church must foster groups for spiritual growth that are small enough to devote sufficient time and allow sufficient trust to develop.

⁵ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, p. 45.

Putting Principles into Practice

Nurturing spiritual growth at its deepest levels requires structures for ministry that embody the principles derived from Jesus' methods. This section outlines a general plan for a ministry of spiritual growth at the deepest levels, which is experienced in the smallest of groups rather than in gatherings of the whole church or mid-size ministry groups of various kinds.

Any ministry structure that aims to create a context for deeply personal engagement in spiritual growth according to Jesus' methods must have the following characteristics:

- *Relational*: Christian spiritual growth is not an individualistic endeavor, a project of self-help, or a merely private affair between an individual and God. Rather, it is always a journey with other believers.
- *Small*: Christian spiritual growth cannot be experienced exclusively in large groups. It requires the kind of close friendships that one can only have with just a few people at a time.
- *Dialogical*: Christian spiritual growth cannot occur exclusively by receiving information or communication from someone else. It requires the kind of personal disclosure that creates communion between friends who love one another and encourage one another to love and good deeds.
- *Directive and responsive*: Christian spiritual growth is neither merely an organized plan of study or action nor merely an uncoordinated response to changing circumstances. It is a directed journey toward the goal of knowing, loving, and serving Christ that travels in and through the unique and often unpredictable pathways of individual lives. Therefore, its format includes interaction about both planned and unplanned topics.
- *Flexible to be tailored to individual needs*: Christian spiritual growth cannot be organized around a single uniform curriculum for all people. It requires teaching and application adapted to the needs of individuals.
- *Holistic in scope*: Christian spiritual growth must nurture growth toward health and holiness in every dimension of life.

In order to embody all of the preceding principles, Central organizes its ministry of spiritual growth at the deepest levels with **growth groups**. These groups are very small groups that meet frequently to nurture the spiritual growth of each member.

The structure of growth groups

Growth groups have 2-4 people. This size is sufficiently small to permit the depth of interaction necessary for personal growth. The range of options permits flexibility to accommodate one-to-one mentoring, which is perhaps better suited for nurturing new Christians or people struggles with specific crises, and groups of 3-4, which are better suited for people who are peers and have less of a hierarchical relationship.

Growth groups are single-sex groups. Growth groups will inevitably need to address matters of sexuality that would be highly uncomfortable and inappropriate for a group involving men and women.

Growth groups are bound by a group covenant. Each member of the group makes a formal commitment by subscribing to a written statement that describes the group's purpose, format, activities, and boundaries.

Growth groups commit for the long term. Each group agrees to remain together long enough to see lasting changes take root in the life of each member. The ideal would be to meet for whatever length of time is necessary to complete a course of study and develop spiritual growth plans and practices together in each of the seven major dimensions of life (outlined above). Ordinarily, that will likely be a minimum of 2-3 years, although the value of the groups will only grow as relationships deepen over extended periods of time.

The activities of growth groups

Building upon the example of Jesus' methods, spiritual friendship dictates the core activities of Central's growth groups. Spiritual friendships are close friendships formed with the explicit intent to foster spiritual growth. Thus, the essential practices that sustain growth groups are the practices that build and sustain friendships between Christians who are committed to helping one another cultivate spiritual growth toward greater maturity in Christ. Committing to a growth group is committing primarily to a set of relationships and practices, not primarily a specific curriculum or program of study.

Growth groups meet frequently. Groups meet with enough regularity and frequency to stay up-to-date with the daily rhythms, struggles, victories, joys, and sorrows of each member. In most cases, this will ordinarily require meeting *at least twice per month*, although a weekly meeting would be ideal.

Growth groups communicate frequently. Members of the group stay in contact outside their regular meetings. Some connection (e.g., email, phone call, text) should usually occur on a weekly basis between the members of the group.

Growth groups study together to form a vision for personal spiritual growth. Groups study the word of God and other Christian resources together with the goal of personally applying the Scriptures. The primary goal of study is developing a clear vision of maturity in Christ in multiple dimensions of life.

Growth groups engage in self-analysis and set specific goals and commitments to form a concrete intention for personal spiritual growth. By applying a biblically based vision of spiritual maturity, members assess their levels of health in the various dimensions of their life. Members also develop a spiritual growth plan or rule of life with specific individual goals for growth in each dimension of life that are observable/measurable, stretching/challenging, and attainable/reasonable.

Growth groups engage in specific practices as the means of personal spiritual growth. Members of the group commit to specific practices that will enable them to experience growing communion with God, to put sinful habits to death, and to cultivate new habits of health and holiness that reflect the character and mission of Christ in all seven dimensions of life.

Growth groups worship together and pray for each other. Informed by their study and meditation upon the word of God, groups seek communion with God together and pray with and for each other with great regularity and specificity.

Growth groups walk together in friendship to provide support and challenge for personal spiritual growth. The primary purpose of the group is to provide a relational context that nurtures spiritual growth. Groups work to share their lives with one another in ways that build trust and foster the transparency, vulnerability, and accountability necessary for supportive conversations about personal experiences. Members share their specific spiritual growth plans with one another, and they review their goals and their progress in growth with one another. These friendships provide settings to celebrate personal victories and blessings, mourn personal struggles and sorrows, respond to personal crises, and gently encourage and challenge one another toward perseverance and growth.