REVEAL: Where Are You?

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By Cally Parkinson

Since the birth of the Christian church two thousand years ago, we have judged our ability to help people grow spiritually 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 volunteer? 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.

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 (Genesis 3:9): Where are you?

Since 2004, when we began this work, thousands of people have told us about their relationship with God. We’ve listened with no other goal than to see how God works in people’s lives. When we look at the results, we see patterns. The research is scientific. The patterns are biblical.

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.

Where are the people who attend your church? Are they moving closer to God? What if you could know? That’s what REVEAL is about—finding out how your people respond to the question God asked Adam in the Garden of Eden: Where are you?

The spiritual continuum

The hallmark finding of REVEAL is the spiritual continuum, which is a progressive series of four segments of people defined by increasing levels of intimacy in their relationship with Christ:
Exploring Christ—the people in this segment have a basic belief in God but do not have a relationship with Christ. While some are truly seeking to resolve their uncertainty about who Jesus is, others are spiritually apathetic—passively attending church, sometimes for years, with little momentum in their spiritual journey.

Growing in Christ—the people in this segment have a personal relationship with Christ. They’ve made a commitment to trust him with their salvation and for their eternity, but they are just beginning to learn what it means to be in a relationship with him.

Close to Christ—these people depend on Christ daily. They see Christ as someone who assists them in life. On a daily basis, they turn to him for help and guidance for the issues they face.

Christ-Centered—the people in this segment would identify their relationship with Christ as the most important relationship in their lives. They see their lives as fully surrendered to Jesus and his agenda, subordinating everything to his will and his desires.

This spiritual continuum is highly predictive of spiritual growth. This means that all the behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs related to a growing love of God and others (which is the REVEAL definition of spiritual growth) advance in lockstep with this continuum. So everything—from daily prayer to Bible reading, to serving and evangelism, and most importantly, love for God and others—move sharply higher when we look through this lens of a relationship with Christ. Importantly, the continuum is not a function of age, gender, or church tenure. It is defined, very simply, by how people view their relationship with Christ, which means we find old and young, male and female, evenly distributed across the four segments.

Identifying these segments gives pastors and church leaders a good framework to figure out where people are in terms of spiritual maturity. But just knowing where they are is not enough. Our ultimate goal is to understand how people actually grow to become more like Jesus. We want a deep understanding of the most significant catalysts of spiritual growth across the continuum so we can really help people move from one segment to the next.

Three spiritual movements

Spiritual growth needs are dramatically different for early believers compared to committed Christ-followers. REVEAL has dedicated significant effort to understanding what catalyzes spiritual growth at different points along the continuum. The second REVEAL book, Follow Me, addresses our findings regarding the impact of fifty-plus catalysts of spiritual growth. For the purpose of this summary, we’ll cover the headlines from that work.
Movement 1: Early Spiritual Growth *(Exploring Christ to Growing in Christ)*

Movement 1 is all about learning and accepting the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. The dictionary defines *belief* as “acceptance by the mind that something is true or real, often underpinned by an emotional or spiritual sense of certainty.” Without full acceptance in the belief that salvation by grace and the Trinity are true, it is difficult to imagine experiencing authentic spiritual growth as a Christian. So it is not surprising that the spiritual growth of individuals in Movement 1 is characterized by wrestling with these beliefs.

We see a surge in agreement with core beliefs when we compare those who are Exploring Christ with those who are Growing in Christ, indicating to us that beliefs are the most significant catalysts of spiritual growth in its earliest stage. We also believe the church provides an essential learning platform for these fundamental beliefs as well as a faith-based environment for people’s earliest impressions of Christian life.

Movement 2: Intermediate Spiritual Growth *(Growing in Christ to Close to Christ)*

Once a person demonstrates a solid grasp of the fundamentals in any sport or area of study, all good coaches and teachers have the same advice: *Practice!* The concept of practice is a central theme of Movement 2. In this movement, spiritual growth goes from a beginner level, when a person is first Growing in Christ, to an intermediate level of Close to Christ intimacy. What we see is evidence of increased immersion—through personal spiritual practices—in the activities that advance spiritual growth to deeper levels of personal conviction and devotion to Christ.

The deepest, most trustworthy relationships in our lives grow as a direct result of the time and energy we put into them—like hours of conversations, or messages of encouragement and support in a dark time. People in Movement 2 accelerate the frequency of these types of investments in their relationship with God. We see big increases in all spiritual practices—from daily prayer and reflection on Scripture, to solitude and journaling—when we compare those who are Growing in Christ with those who are Close to Christ.

This is when the intellectually-based relationship of Movement 1—rooted in the facts about God—transforms into an emotionally rich relationship *with* God.

Movement 3: Advanced Spiritual Growth *(Close to Christ to Christ-Centered)*

Movement 3 is a time when people open their hearts fully to Christ’s call on their lives. They have internalized the fundamentals of Christian belief, and personal spiritual practices are as routine as brushing their teeth. Christ-Centered behavior pours out of them because of their passionate faith.

“Giving away my life” is the catalytic attitude that demonstrates the greatest acceleration for those moving from the Close to Christ segment to the Christ-Centered segment. This increased willingness to over “everything that is important” to Christ—from finances, to time, to one’s...
life—is demonstrated in their rising spiritual behaviors. Tithing, evangelism, and serving the church as well as the under-resourced all rise as people surrender more and more of what they own and who they are to Jesus.

**Spiritual growth: can we keep it simple?**

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. This observation, while true, makes spiritual growth feel very complicated—difficult to understand, hard to resource and support, impossible to measure.

The encouragement from REVEAL is that, which spiritual growth is complex, there appears to be a simplicity in its general progression that may helps us think about it differently, to resource it better, and to encourage it more productively.

So while there will always be an enormous unexplained dimension to spirituality, we believe the simplicity of the four segments on the spiritual continuum, and the three movements that advance their journey, does give us insight on actions we can take—with a high degree of confidence that those actions will make a difference in the lives of those we serve.