



CENTER FOR
BIBLE ENGAGEMENT
at Our Daily Bread Ministries

DEFINING & MEASURING SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A RESEARCH-BASED PASTOR'S GUIDE



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Portions of this booklet were taken from *The Good Shepherd: Forty Biblical Insights on Leading and Being Led* © 2024 by Timothy S. Laniak.

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WELCOME

Through this research-based series, I invite fellow Christians to reflect together on our lives and work as shepherds. As shepherds, we're responsible to God for the way we lead those in our care. Pastors should be thinking of their congregations not only as sheep (and goats!) but also as shepherds working among their own flocks.

My experience as a spiritual shepherd includes a wide variety of venues, serving in settings as diverse as welfare housing, seminary leadership, and nonprofit boards. I've led children's clubs, youth groups, neighborhood Bible studies, evangelistic outreaches, and, most importantly, my own family. Having trained seminary students for decades, I constantly marvel at the amazing diversity of communities to which God has called shepherd leaders.

The Bible does not offer the shepherd metaphor as an exercise in literary artistry but rather to teach about leadership. In fact, shepherd imagery is used mostly in critiques of poor human leadership. The verbal pictures—grounded in cultural realities—help create an inescapable standard for responsible leadership. These pictures spoke to the original audiences in the most serious terms. Like parables, metaphors compel a person to think, to feel, and to act differently.¹



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The metaphor of the shepherd leader still makes its comprehensive challenge today. As shepherds, we've been called to self-sacrifice as well as to self-care, to be wise leaders while following humbly, to have determination with adaptability, to be physically present but skilled at delegating, to work alone and to work together.² God is calling "shepherds after his own heart" to be models for his sheep.

The Center for Bible Engagement (CBE), the research arm of Our Daily Bread Ministries, developed this series to help shepherds guide their flocks with renewed focus and purpose.

Seize this opportunity to reflect on your Divine Shepherd and your calling as his field hand.

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INTRODUCTION

A SHEPHERD'S GUIDANCE

LEADING WITH PURPOSE

A shepherd's guidance involves shaping mission, casting vision, and managing objectives in a constantly changing environment. Beyond provision and protection, where are shepherds trying to take their flocks? What will it take to get there?

The goal for every shepherd is 100% productivity and reproduction—the same goal as the Owner's. For the flock to move ahead toward the shepherd's goal, there's a need for the shepherding traits of persistence, adaptability, and wisdom. Sheep by nature can't see the big picture and occasionally need to be driven to their destination.

Wilderness stories in the Pentateuch characterize God as the Guiding Shepherd. Israel's Divine Pastor led his people through the wilderness by pillars of cloud and fire. He made a pathway through the Red Sea and eventually led his people safely to their haven of rest (Psalm 77:19-20; 78:53-54). Numbers appears to be a book about aimless wandering, but the summary in chapter 33 reveals God leading with purpose. Forty extra years in the desolation of the

wilderness were tacked on to the itinerary because of disobedience. But God stayed near, guiding them day and night. He was determined to bring their children into the land of promise. Throughout their sojourn, God kept his vision for the community before them (Numbers 34-35). **Stationary permanence was not the divine ideal.**¹

When the Messiah Jesus came, he literally "tented" among his people (translated *lived* or *dwelt* in John 1:14). To a prospective disciple Jesus warned, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). His real home was in heaven, and he never lost sight of it.

As we build buildings and make long-term plans, we easily forget how transient and ephemeral our lives and ministries really are. Are we leading our flocks with a sense of this world's transience and heaven's permanence . . . that what counts for all of us is what's ahead?²

THE CHALLENGE

HOW DO WE HELP THEM GROW?

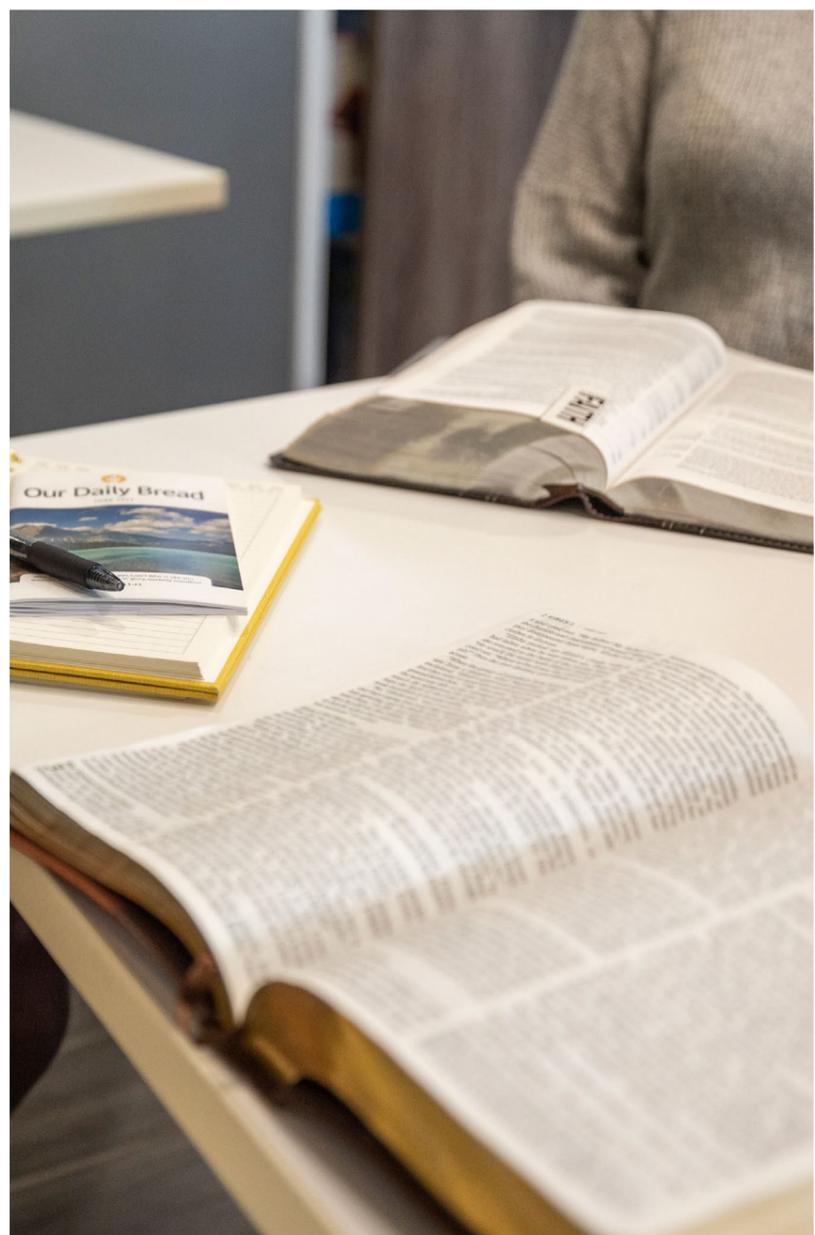
Biblically, we're called to go from "glory to glory" in our walk with Christ, to be transformed by the Holy Spirit into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18 KJV). Many under our care, however, need clearly stated definitions and objectives to know how to grow as believers.

According to researcher George Barna, **"People aspire to be spiritually mature, but they do not know what it means. Pastors want to guide others on the path to spiritual wholeness, but they are often not clearly defining the goals or the outcomes of that process."**¹

CBE found this to be true, as well. In one of our earlier studies, four out of five church attenders reported a strong desire to grow spiritually. When asked to define spiritual maturity, nearly 30% replied that they didn't know how to define it or didn't answer at all.²

Most believers want to improve their spiritual life, but many have trouble visualizing what spiritual growth looks like. Pastors desiring to help their congregants in this area can begin by

laying the appropriate groundwork.³ This groundwork should include what the Bible itself has to say about spiritual formation and discipleship, a clear definition of what spiritual growth is, and an examination of research-based predictors for growth.



PART II

DEFINING SPIRITUAL GROWTH

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

While there's little agreement among the Christian community on a definition of spiritual growth, the Bible clearly indicates that spiritual growth is the work of the Holy Spirit nurturing in us key qualities such as knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, kindness, and love.

Based on the foundational elements and guiding principles of Galatians 5:22-26 and 2 Peter 1:3-11, CBE has adopted this definition of spiritual growth:

“

Spiritual growth is the transformative process of the Holy Spirit that aligns believers with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Simply said, spiritual growth means becoming more like Jesus. The behavioral outcome of spiritual growth is *“becoming less of the person I was before I surrendered my life to Jesus and more like Christ in my thoughts, words and deeds.”*¹



Jesus pointed to fruit-bearing (both good and bad) as a behavioral test of a person’s inner faith (Matthew 7:15-20). **Behavioral outcomes of spiritual growth** include noticeable increases in positive behaviors (“good fruit”) and fewer negative behaviors (“bad fruit”). We know through our “Power of 4” research, for example, that engaging with the Bible four or more days per week is related to measurable behavioral changes, including a more active faith and fewer struggles with common temptations, when compared with those who seldom or never engage with the Bible.

Specifically, frequent Bible engagement is related to reductions in emotional struggles, such as loneliness, bitterness, or fear. **People who regularly receive, reflect on, and respond to Scripture may experience more peace and joy in their lives** because they are less burdened by negative emotions. Additionally, frequent Bible engagement is associated with a higher likelihood of sharing one’s faith,

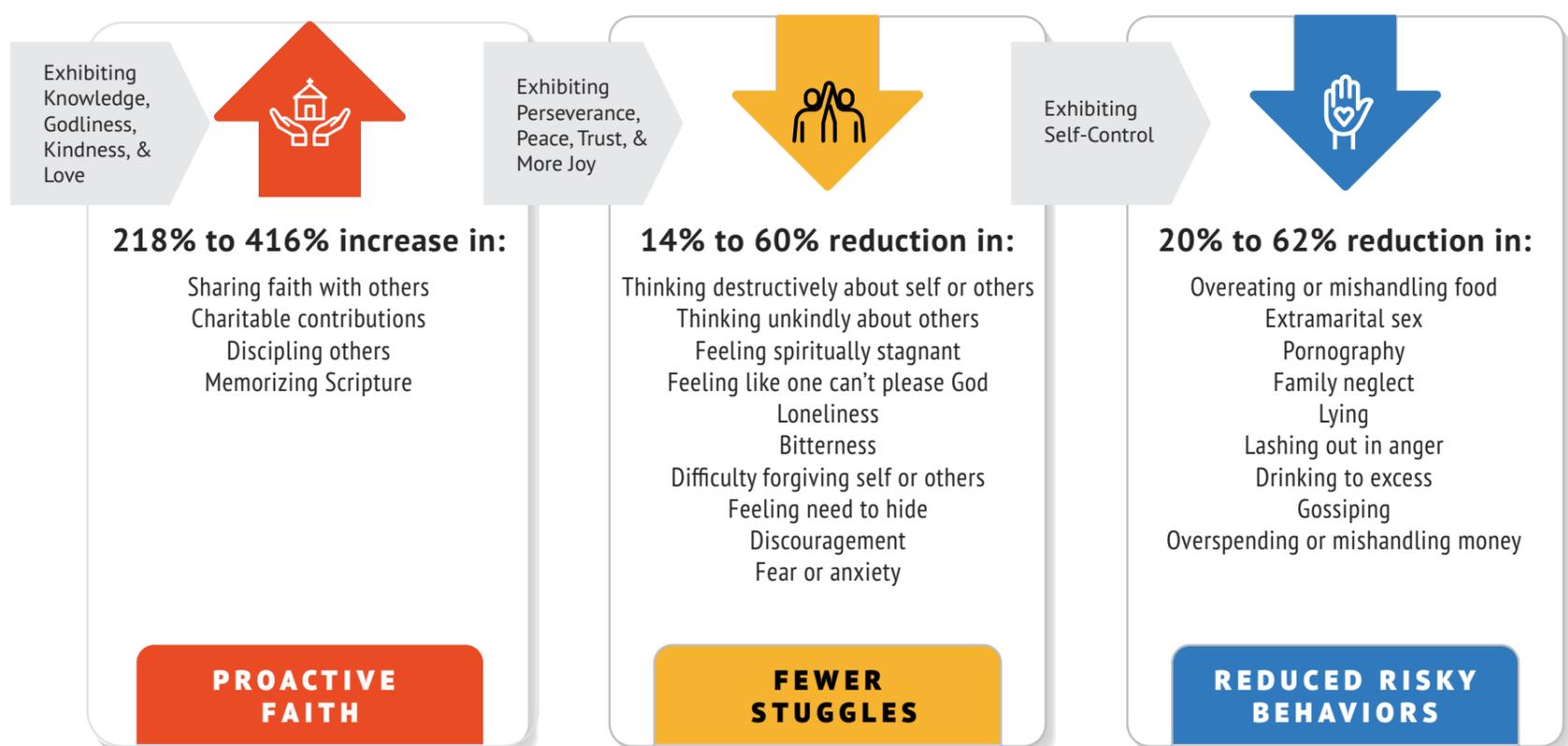
discipling others, memorizing Scripture, demonstrating a love for others and God, and giving financially to charity.

Although we cannot conclude from the research that Bible engagement causes behavioral changes, CBE found from our eight-year “Power of 4” study with over 100,000 global participants that frequent Bible engagement is a reliable predictor of spiritual growth, showing evidence of spiritual fruit. Similar findings identifying Bible engagement as the key driver of spiritual growth have also been reported by Willow Creek Association, Lifeway Research, and American Bible Society.²

To shepherd leaders, this should come as no surprise. We know from the Bible itself that God’s Word is a primary means for the Holy Spirit to transform his people (2 Timothy 3:16). The surprise is that we can now reliably assess and measure spiritual growth over time.

THE POWER OF 4

Engaging in the Bible 4+ days per week is related to:



PART III

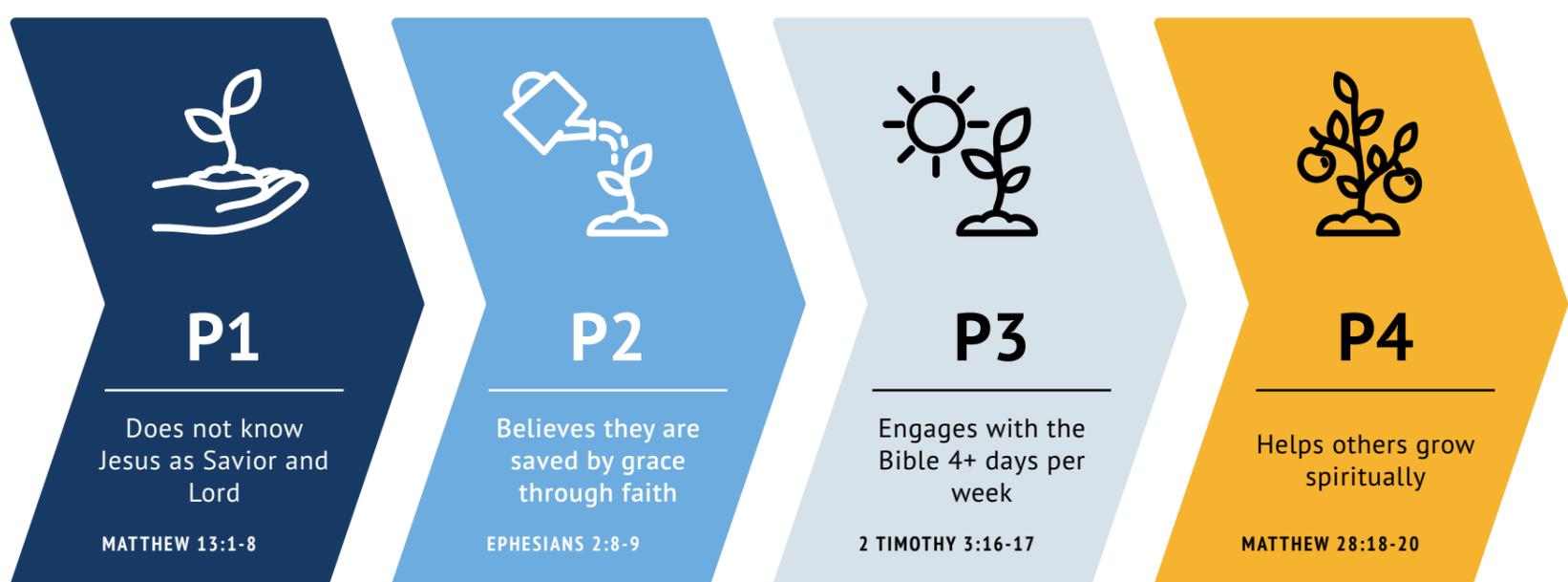
SETTING GOALS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

PREPARING FOR A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

CBE developed a simple model—grounded in Scripture and our “Power of 4” research—to help people see where they are on their spiritual journey. Are people **without any faith** in Jesus, do they **believe** in Jesus, are they active **disciples** of Jesus, or are they fulfilling his Great Commission by **discipling** others?

WHAT DOES SPIRITUAL MATURITY LOOK LIKE?

Based on their answers, congregants are divided into four broad Personas (P1 to P4). Our simple model can help people visualize at a basic level what spiritual growth looks like and establish goals. In many ways, the Persona Categorization (below) parallels the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:1-8. The focus of the parable is not on the Sower or the seed but on the four soils. It considers our responsibility as Christ-followers to be fertile soil. The supernatural result comes from the divine Word and the work of the Holy Spirit.¹





P1: NEEDS EVANGELISM (JOHN 1:35-39)

These are people who do not believe they will go to heaven because of faith in Jesus Christ. This broad category includes everyone from the antagonistic atheist to neutral agnostic, to the spiritually curious to those committed to other faiths. It also includes practicing Christians who doubt their salvation, and people who have walked away from their faith entirely. People in this category are questioners and seekers.



P2: NEEDS DISCIPLESHIP (JOHN 4:28-30)

This group includes people who believe they will go to heaven because of faith in Jesus Christ. However, they're not reading the Bible most days of the week. People who are new to the faith, or who are not growing spiritually, tend to lack core disciplines, such as regular church attendance, prayer, and Scripture reading. Many are intimidated by the Bible and find it difficult to understand, without any connection to real life.



P3: NEEDS ACTIVATION (JOHN 6:67-69)

These are followers of Jesus who read the Bible four or more days a week. People in this category are likely to connect with God through a variety of means, from regular church attendance to individual prayer and worship. Although they are pursuing transformation into the likeness of Jesus, they are not in the habit of discipling or sharing their faith with others.



P4: ACTIVE DISCIPLE-MAKERS (MATTHEW 28:18-20; ACTS 1:8)

This group consists of people who say they are saved by grace through faith in Jesus and regularly engage the Bible four or more days a week. Disciple-makers are intentional about discipling: they continually seek opportunities to interact with others and help believers grow to spiritual maturity. They talk with people about Scripture, their faith, and spiritual struggles. Many also evangelize. Most disciple-makers connect frequently with God through a variety of means, from church attendance and Christian podcasts to individual prayer and worship.

PART IV

MEASURING SPIRITUAL GROWTH

THE POTENTIAL

CBE's simple Persona Categorization model (in Part III) can be used as a starting point to identify, understand, and support people at different phases in their spiritual journey. It also provides a visual of spiritual growth with basic, but fundamental, growth goals.¹ Because we've based our model on frequent Bible engagement, a reliable *predictor of spiritual growth*², it can also be used to establish a baseline with a given individual, community, or population to assess spiritual growth over time (as shown on the lower right). This can be done informally or in more detail through a survey tool, like CBE's Spiritual Journey Accelerator.

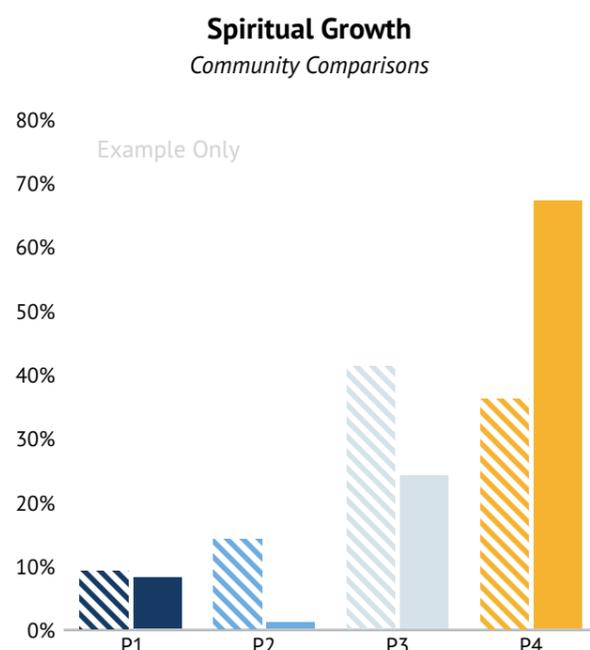
THE LIMITATIONS

The Persona Categorization model is not intended to be comprehensive. As evidenced in our categorization, people's spiritual needs are diverse. Spiritual growth is complex. The process is not always linear; it is often elliptical, with some regression along with progress. In reality, we are like *all* four types of soil in the Parable of the Sower throughout our lives. The four Persona categories simply help people understand where they are (or where

someone else is) on their spiritual journey at a given time and how to best "nudge" them toward maturity (P4).

Obedient response to God's Word promotes spiritual growth, not through works-based righteousness generated by human effort, but through what the Holy Spirit does in us and through us. God graciously provided salvation through Jesus, who alone reconciles all who repent of their sin and put their faith in him.

Therefore, this model should not be interpreted as steps to gain salvation, but rather as steps on our spiritual journeys to promote a deeper relationship with God and one another.





*Be fruitful and multiply,
and fill the earth.*

GENESIS 1:28 NASB

CONCLUSION

THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING GOOD

To put the concern for spiritual growth in perspective, a productive and reproductive flock parallels the **blessed life** God encouraged among humans in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (NASB). The New Testament echoes the creation mandate in the Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The disciples were to multiply followers of Jesus throughout the earth. One question we need to answer is whether or not we are personally reproducing. In our ministries, mentoring relationships, and families, are we encouraging spiritual growth? Are we

modeling, discipling, and evangelizing? Are we naturally and organically guiding others to find new life?¹

We are “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (James 4:14). Over the course of our own journeys, our identity as temporary residents needs to be imprinted on our minds as leaders. Are we leading our flocks intentionally along the edges of settled society—and moving them forward so that they, too, can become good shepherds?² Are we instilling in them a sense of urgency to seek the lost? While we need to pursue objectives, goals, and strategic plans for our communities, the ultimate goal is to get them all home.

APPENDIX

SERMON OUTLINE

Title: Called to Grow (Defining & Measuring Spiritual Growth)

Main Idea: Research tells us people want to grow spiritually, but without a clear definition of *spiritual growth* and defined goals, it's difficult for believers to reach spiritual maturity.

Overview: We're all on a spiritual journey, whether it's recognized or not. As Christians, are we living life with a sense of this world's transience and heaven's permanence . . . that what counts for us is what's ahead? Are we helping others do the same?

Introduction: Biblically, we're called to go from "glory to glory" in our walk with Christ, to be transformed by the Holy Spirit into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18 KJV). To a prospective disciple Jesus warned, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). His real home was in heaven, and he never lost sight of it. "Stationary permanence" was never the divine ideal.

Body: *Spiritual growth* isn't just a concept. It's a commitment to the One who made us. We're called to *grow in humility* (John 12:24). We're called as the Church to make disciples of all nations. But how do we grow spiritually? Let's start with the basics.

1 | What does *spiritual growth* mean?

- a. 30% of church attenders can't define it, and yet we're called to grow spiritually.
- b. Simple Definition: *Spiritual growth* means becoming more like Jesus.
- c. Expanded Definition: "...more like Christ in my thoughts, words, and deeds."

2 | What does spiritual growth look like? It's a journey to an eternal destination.

- a. Persona 1 - Does not know Jesus as Savior and Lord (Matthew 13:1-8)
- b. Persona 2 - Believes they are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9)
- c. Persona 3 - Engages with the Bible 4+ times/week (2 Timothy 3:16-17); "*Po4*"
- d. Persona 4 - Helps others grow spiritually (Matthew 28:18-20). **This is the goal.**

3 | Is our journey always linear? In reality, spiritual growth is complex.

- a. This is a simple model that parallels the four soils in the Parable of Sower.
- b. Remember, these are not steps to gain salvation. (Faith Justification)
- c. Salvation + Spiritual Growth = Great Commission

Conclusion: Where are you on your walk with God? Take the next step with him.

NOTES

Portions of this booklet were taken from *The Good Shepherd* (Laniak, 2024) and Center for Bible Engagement research publications.

Preface

1. Tim Laniak, "Introduction," in *The Good Shepherd* (Grand Rapids, MI: Our Daily Bread Publishing, 2024), 14, 16-17.
2. Tim Laniak, "Epilogue," in *The Good Shepherd* (Grand Rapids, MI: Our Daily Bread Publishing, 2024), 272.

Introduction

1. Tim Laniak, "Day 28: Leading with Purpose," in *The Good Shepherd* (Grand Rapids, MI: Our Daily Bread Publishing, 2024), 193-195.
2. Tim Laniak, "Day 40: Home," in *The Good Shepherd* (Grand Rapids, MI: Our Daily Bread Publishing, 2024), 267-269.

Part I

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Part IV

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2. Cole, Arnold, and Pamela Ovwigho. 2012. "Bible Engagement as the Key to Spiritual Growth: A Research Synthesis." https://www.centerforbibleengagement.org/_files/ugd/c59c7d_28c00fc7279a44e8832f15503914c426.pdf.

Conclusion

1. Tim Laniak, "Day 34: Reproduction," in *The Good Shepherd* (Grand Rapids, MI: Our Daily Bread Publishing, 2024), 230, 232-233.
2. Tim Laniak, "Day 40: Home," in *The Good Shepherd* (Grand Rapids, MI: Our Daily Bread Publishing, 2024), 269.

RESOURCES

THE GOOD SHEPHERD: FORTY BIBLICAL INSIGHTS ON LEADING AND BEING LED

What does it take to live like a shepherd? See how biblical leadership is embodied in the everyday work of shepherds.

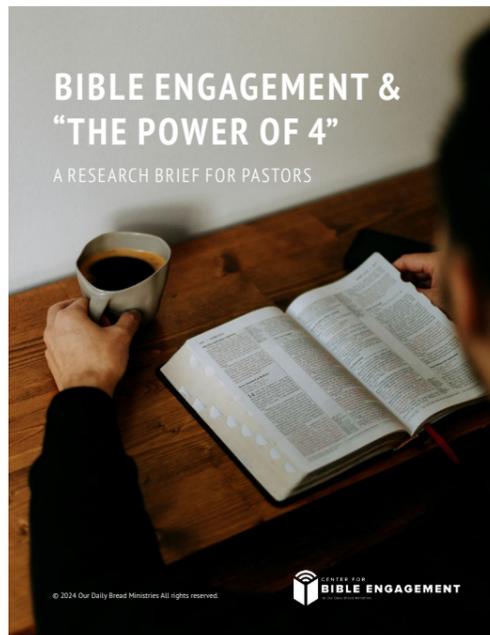
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