Intentional Spiritual Growth (Abridged Description)

Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph.4:21-24)

What makes Spiritual Growth under the Life Model different from what you may have heard elsewhere?

We do not grow up spiritually by acting spiritual or doing “spiritual” things. We grow up by attaching to God, receiving life from him, and seeing reality through the eyes of heaven, including who God really is and who He has made us to be. In many ways, our spiritual development mirrors what identity development looks like for a child with ideal parents, including attachment, receiving love, help with experiential learning, and so on. While traditional discipleship may resemble a behavior modification program based on reason and will power, God’s way of growing us up is rooted in a love bond with God and identity formation. Thus, the Life Model views spiritual growth in relational terms, and takes into account the maturity level of the individual.

How do we bond with God and grow our new identity?

This paper will present an overview of what we believe are the key elements to thriving spiritually as a Christian. We will be closely following a model of spiritual transformation (usually referred to as Christian Formation) called “VIM” that has been articulated so well by Dallas Willard in his various works. The letters of VIM stand for:

- **Vision**: Things we need to know about Kingdom life
- **Intention**: Choices we need to make and Values we need to hold
- **Means**: Things we can do to make a space for God to work

**Vision**

First, it is God’s primary intention to have a relationship with us and to grow us up corporately into a mature community of God. That is the whole reason for creation. That does not mean that we will all become spiritual elders. It means that we will all have a relationship with God as part of a larger family, no matter where we are in our human maturity or spiritual development.

At conversion, God gives us a new nature that we did not have before (Rom.5-6). But that does not mean the work is all over. That new nature needs to grow up and mature, just like babies need to grow up into adults. Because we do not know our true God-given nature, we need to be transformed from the inside out as we become mature subjects of God’s Kingdom. God wants to do more than just change our behaviors. He wants to bring us in
line with our new hearts so that we are more like Him. For example, instead of making us try hard to learn how to perform acts of mercy, God wants to make us into merciful people.

This process of transformation is supposed to be commonplace in the Christian experience. The reason we often see so little of it is that we have not been taught how to engage well with God. And over time we come to disbelieve that transformation is possible. What we need is to understand the big picture of what God intends for us, and then begin to practice intentional ways of participating with what God wants to do in us.

But participating with God means knowing what part is our part, and what part is God’s part. If we try to do too much of the work, we fall into a religion of self-effort that will fail to transform our inner life. If we do too little and just wait for God to take over our lives and fix everything, we do not learn the tasks necessary to mature spiritually, and again nothing changes. Our real job is to submit to the task of learning, and to become His apprentices of life and love. Our job is not so much to master the Christian life as it is to submit to it. And like everything else in maturity, the loving presence of another person who can model this for us and encourage us in our efforts is very important.

Of course, if we have not been taught how to connect well with others, we may have difficulty connecting with God. If we have been hurt by others more powerful than ourselves, God may seem scary, uncaring, or distant. Our connection to God may be more of a fear bond than a love bond. That’s one of the reasons why we have been adopted into God’s family. God can use other members of our new family to come alongside and help us get better acquainted with God. They can do this through telling stories about their relationship with God and what that love bond is like. They can teach us how to listen for and discern His voice, and help us with our other maturity development.

God’s part is to do what we cannot do. That is called grace. As we grow up in Christ, we actually need more grace, not less. As for how we participate in receiving God’s work in us, Dallas Willard has pointed out that grace is not opposed to effort, it is only opposed to earning. That is, we cannot achieve character transformation by direct effort, because that would be earning it. But grace is completely compatible with the effort involved in surrender, submission, learning, reaching out, and engaging with the Holy Spirit. We will talk more about what our part looks like in the section on “Means.”

**Intention**

In order to grow up spiritually, we need to deliberately make space in our lives for God. Like any relationship, our connection with God will atrophy and become unhealthy if not nurtured. And just as the body needs food on a regular basis, our spirits need to feed on the Spirit of God in order to grow and mature.

For those at infant or early child-level maturity, the spiritual family is especially important here, because those in early development may have difficulty understanding or identifying the kinds of choices that need to be made. The community of believers must be aware of
those who need help making a space for God and who need help doing so on a consistent basis, and to provide the support, training, and encouragement needed.

So how does one engage with God? First and foremost we must simply recapture the wonder and joy of being with God. We do not know him nearly as well as we would like to think. He is an incredible mystery to us, and we will never exhaust the possibilities of discovery in getting to know him better. Approaching God with the expectation of newness and wonder brings us closer to the nature of our real relationship to him and opens our hearts to receiving life from simply knowing him better.

As in any love-based relationship, we need to choose to be available, to spend time, and to listen well in order to get to know the other person. If we have had good love-bonds with other people, then these choices may not be too difficult. But if most of our connections have been fear bonds or if we have had been given bad theology, then we may find ourselves fear-bonded to God and need the help of others to deal with this.

For Christians in the Western world, the single most pressing problem we face in regard to intentionality is the sheer busyness of life. Most adults are juggling the demands of a primary relationship, a career, friends, church, and recreation and the multitude of needs presented by family members. To suggest that we also need to take out time to be with God sounds completely unreasonable.

Being deliberate or intentional implies that we make time for focused attention, and do it persistently. We must apply our entire being to the task of engagement for a period of time, and do it often enough to maintain some continuity to our efforts. Intentionality is also not a single decision that takes care of itself after that. It is a decision that must be made every day and every week.

Remember that intentionality is heavily dependant upon maturity development. For example, if we have not yet learned how to do things we do not feel like doing at the moment, or how to say no to external demands, then we may need another person who is upstream from us to help us with our intentions until we can develop the desire and/or skills to make the necessary choices for ourselves.

Means

Given a true vision of the spiritual life and the nature of intentionality, we will now look at some of the means available to us for deliberately engaging with God. It is important to note that we cannot in any way produce the fruit of the spirit by direct effort. We cannot force ourselves to be more loving. But we can spend time with a loving God until his character is better formed in us. Consequently, these tools are simply ways of engaging with God so that the real work can be done by the Holy Spirit.

There are quite literally hundreds of ways to engage with God. Over the centuries we have come to see some patterns to the various ways of engaging God that have proven to be fairly effective in stimulating healing and growth. Some of these means have been called
spiritual disciplines. Others have generally been referred to as specific types of ministry. But it is useful to refer them all collectively as differing Means of Engagement. Some of these means tend to be more private in nature while others are heavily relational. And some tend to be more restorative in function while others are more proactive in their application, pushing the limits of our spiritual life and opening avenues to new awareness. The following chart lists some of the more common means of engagement in terms of these characteristics. They will be further described below.

### Some Means of Deliberate Engagement

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When we first try a new Means, we should begin at the infant level and work our way up. These are all learned tools. Just because a person is at adult level maturity does not mean that he or she can automatically engage with God at that level when using that means. It is important to be patient and learn how to engage very simply first and then grow into it.

Each of the above Means of Engagement will be described below, with special attention given to ways in which people at infant and child-level maturity can practice them.

Those at adult-level maturity should be able to reach a point where they can practice these Means as they are led by God, and as they see the need to do so. They can also share their experiences with other adults, especially where discernment is needed in regard to what was heard or felt. And they should also be open to incorporating elements of infant and child-level practice of these Means even after they have grown in their use and understanding of them.

Parent and Elder-level persons should be able to grow into practicing the entire range of infant to adult Means of Engagement. They can then take the initiative to share their experiences with others, especially those of infant and child-level maturity. They should be able to train others in practicing these Means, with special attention to those of child-level maturity.
**Dialogue with God:** Having two-way conversations with God. This is one of the most important means available to us, and can be employed as part of all of the other means in order to draw out what God wants us to learn from them.

  *Infant:* Be with others as they dialogue with God. Listen to stories of dialoguing.
  *Child:* Try dialoguing with God with guidance and encouragement from parents/elders.

**Solitude:** Getting away by yourself for an extended period of time (anything from about 3 hours to several days). When we strip away all of the distractions and the things we rely on to tell us who we are, we can then deal with our identity issues on a more fundamental level. Many people find this almost intolerable, but with help and training it can become a vital doorway to healing and peace of mind.

  *Infant:* Listen to stories of others who practice solitude. Learn to rest.
  *Child:* Try short periods of solitude with help from a parent/elder, both in preparation and in follow up afterwards.

**Meditation (contemplative prayer):** Meditating on a single word or phrase from Scripture, contemplating an attribute of God, or holding a single picture in your mind such as the Prodigal’s Return, and letting God speak to you about that. Truth takes time to emerge, and this practice helps us to see things anew from God’s perspective.

  *Infant:* Spend time with a parent/elder who can meditate aloud.
  *Child:* Practice an interactive meditation with a parent/elder. Daydream about God when you are alone.

**Reading the Word:** Reading Scripture, not with our powers of reason but with an ear to what the Spirit of God wants to say to us. Submit to the Word, don’t try to master it.

  *Infant:* Listen to those who share what they have received from this practice.
  *Child:* Try reading short phrases from Scripture (a parent/elder can help find good phrases to use) and listening to what God says about them.

**Private Worship:** Singing to God helps to anchor truth in our bodies. One way to do this is to make a single CD filled with songs that speak to you about a single theme, such as Joy, Identity, Repentance, or whatever, and then choose one that fits your need of the moment.

  *Infant:* Learn new songs and sing them whenever you feel like it.
  *Child:* Learn which songs speak to which needs, and sing the one that applies to your current state. Ask for help in this.

**Fasting:** Saying “no” to the desires of the body. There are many kinds of fasting. Be sure to learn about what is involved and consider all physical conditions before attempting this (be wise and get help). Like other means, this one may take some practice before it provides substantial rewards.

  *Infant:* This can wait until you are more mature. Seek parent or elder-level help if you have cravings you cannot control.
  *Child:* Fasting from food should only be done after you are physically an adult. Learn to control cravings with help from others.
**Connecting:** Deliberate bids for building community. We need one another far more than we know. It is important to connect with others one-on-one and in small groups for the purpose of wrestling with real spiritual growth issues, and not just doing busy-work curriculum together. This is a unique way for us to be with one another and build joy.  
Infant: Build joy with others, especially those who can tell you how God is at work in you.  
Child: Seek out older minds to connect to.

**Story Telling:** Hearing the stories of others and telling our own. We need to hear how other people wrestle with life-issues, and how God works in people for good. Our brains are uniquely designed to learn from stories.  
Infant: Listen to stories.  
Child: Learn to share stories with help from a parent/elder.

**Encouragement:** Pointing one another back to God. Our vision is often clouded by life and circumstance. Having another person come alongside, walk with us, and help us look toward God is invaluable. This also includes calling attention to what we see of God’s hand in another person’s life.  
Infant: Be encouraged by older persons.  
Child: Seek out encouragement, and with the help of others, learn to encourage.

**Service to Others:** Helping, serving, and spending time. We need to serve as much as others need to be served. It helps us get outside of ourselves and to be less self-focused.  
Infant: Be with parents/elders as they serve.  
Child: Learn simple acts of service and participate with others in serving. Learn to know when you are tired of serving and need rest.  
Adult: Learn good self-care while serving, so that both you and the person being served have your needs met, even if the serving is hard. Know how to prevent burnout.

**Corporate Worship:** Singing together the praises of God. In addition to the benefits of singing alone, we build joy together and encourage each other in corporate worship.  
Infant: Be with others who are praising God.  
Child: Learn to sing with others.

**Rest / Quiet:** Taking a few minutes to simply quiet our minds and hearts, and to invite the presence of God to bring peace. Just as our bodies need physical rest, our souls need spiritual rest. We need breaks from the intensity of life’s demands to stay healthy, and we cannot hear God very well when our minds are in chaos.  
Infant: Get all the rest you need and want. Be with others who are resting.  
Child: With help from others, learn how to pace yourself through times of intensity and activity, followed by rest and thinking of God. Learn to become calm in the presence of God.
Confession: Saying what is true about us. We can only move forward from where we really are. The more clearly we can state what is true (without toxic shame), the easier it is to encounter God’s perspective and be changed.
   Infant: Listen to others who are seeking restoration through confession.
   Child: With guidance from a parent/elder, learn to confess without shame.

Repentance: Turning from both sin and participation in faulty beliefs. In some churches, repentance can be very shameful. But repentance can become a good word, a life-giving act of compassion toward the self, and an avenue to forgiveness for the soul.
   Infant: Listen to stories of repentance. Listen to people pray for inner change.
   Child: With help from parents/elders, learn to pray for forgiveness and a change of heart and learn to receive forgiveness.

Renunciation: A spoken declaration about stopping a destructive behavior or breaking off a prior vow. Anchors resolutions in your body, and recovers any rights you may have earlier given over to the Enemy.
   Infant: Listen to stories of others who have done this.
   Child: Under the guidance of a parent or elder who has discerned your need to do so, follow their lead in renouncing what must be given up.

Healing Prayer: Letting the light of truth break the power of lies. Please refer to the Life Model discussion on recovery from B-type traumas.
   Infant: This may need to wait. Physically older persons at late stage infant maturity can receive healing prayer when guided by parent/elder persons who know how to minister in this way.
   Child: Able to receive healing prayer when ministered to by older minds.
   Adult: Able to both receive healing and pray for other adults. May at times also be able to pray with some at child-level for healing.

Recovery Support: Working together with others who have struggled with similar problems. This helps us see our own problems from other perspectives.
   Infant: This can wait.
   Child: Learn to talk out struggles with parents/elders. Other children may be present and discuss, but a strong mind needs to be present as well.
   Adult: Can struggle with other adults to find support. Works best with an elder to assist.

Forgiveness: Letting go of the desire for revenge and the belief that a person owes me something for what they have done to me. It also involves the hard work of reconciliation, wherever that is possible.
   Infant: Observe others forgiving and being forgiven.
   Child: With help of parents/elders, learn to forgive those who have hurt you. Learn to repair ruptured friendships. Also learn to receive forgiveness for things you have done.
**Intercession:** Giving serious thought to the needs of others and interacting with God on their behalf.

- Infant: Listen to older persons pray for others. Follow the lead of a parent/elder who models intercessory prayer for you.
- Child: Learn to ask for prayer. Learn to pray for someone else at the prompting of a parent/elder.

**Deliverance:** Confronting the realities of spiritual bondage, engaging in spiritual warfare, and being delivered from the domination of evil beings. This should always be done with the help of others, and in conjunction with other means of engaging that strengthen the soul.

- Infant: Can be prayed for by mature parents and elders who discern the need.
- Child: Can be prayed for by mature parents and elders who discern the need. Can witness others being prayed for.

**Guidelines**

First, be careful not to trivialize these means. Each one has its own learning curve, and we need to submit to experiential training in them before they become fully useful. For example, the simple challenge of connecting with the Spirit instead of focusing on the task itself may take some practice. Or listening to the Spirit and your own reactions while reading the Word, instead of depending on your theology and power of reason to “master” the text. In truth, these means all contain an element of mystery in them that precludes being mastered. If they feel as though they have been “tamed” then you probably have missed something.

Remember that these practices do not “work” by virtue of doing them. They are only a means to actually connect with and learn from God. It is the connection that is paramount, and the two-way communication that takes place within the space that we make for God. This is why we speak of submitting to these means rather than mastering them. Our intent is to actively engage in the process of apprenticeship, which is mostly listening, observing, and learning. God will then reveal to us what we need to see and hear, in ways that are best suited to our own lives. The Spirit loves to mentor his people; our job is to actively pay attention. If this process of hearing God is unfamiliar or difficult for you, it is important to seek help. Like nearly everything else in the spiritual life, this is a lifelong learning task that we can never quite get perfectly and can always use help with.

Finally, we must not only listen to the Spirit, but we must also learn to listen to our own body and pay attention to our inner reactions. For example, when we read something like, “Ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you,” notice what happens in your own spirit. Do you dismiss it as a hyperbole? Do you feel a twinge but move on because you are not supposed to doubt those words? These reactions are the stuff that God would like to explore with you. They can be key to underlying beliefs and attitudes that God desires to change and reshape.
Scripture Resources (NIV)

God’s Vision for His People

… to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there … Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him (Eph.4:12-14)

That your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ (Phil.1:9-11)

So that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe (Phil.2:15)

… asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience (Col.1:9-11)

God’s Provision for his People for Healing and Change

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Mt. 11:28-30)

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him (Jn.7:37-38)

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (Jn.8:36)

The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (Jn.14:26)

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth (Jn.16:13)

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work (1Jn.3:8)
We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life … For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin … count yourselves dead to sin by alive to God … You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness (Rom.6:4-11, 18)

Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life (Rom.6:22)

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe (Eph.1:18-19)

To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us … (Eph.3:20)

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Col.1:13)

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2Pet.1:3)

Our Participation (Grace is opposed to earning, but not effort)

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man … everyone who hears these worlds of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man (Mat.7:24-26)

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (Jn.8:12)

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (Jn.8:31-32)

If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit (Jn.15:5)

If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live (Rom.8:13)
Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Rom.12:2)

Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph.4:21-24)

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose (Ph.2:12-13)

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2Pet.1:5-8)

What does not work

After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? (Gal.3:3)

Such regulations (Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!) indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Col.2:22-23)

What Living Like Jesus Looks Like: Receiving Life and Giving Life Away

Sermon on the Mount (Mt.5-7)

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and Love your neighbor as yourself (Lk.10:27)

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance … For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Mt.25:34-36)