

<b>Series:</b> Portraits of Jesus	<b>Reference:</b> <i>John 15</i>	<b>Title:</b> The Vine	<b>Date:</b> 05.17.2020
<b>Website Writeup:</b>			
What does Jesus mean when talking about the Vine & the Vine Dresser? Will I be cut off? Will I be included? Let's look at some encouraging & powerful insights to His words today in John 15.			

A man was given the opportunity to live in a villa in an Italian vineyard. He didn't know anything about vineyards, but he enjoyed walking among the vines. One day as he was walking he saw tools & a jacket hanging on a post & realized he wasn't alone.

He walked quietly to find out who had invaded this peaceful moment. Turning a corner he saw an old Italian man with pruners & ties in the distance. The Vinedresser. He stopped & watched as the man worked, talking to the vines as he dressed them, sometimes snipping off a branch, throwing into a fire at the end of the row. Or, lifting a branch growing downward tucking it back up into the the vine. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to his work, why did he cut one off & tuck another back in? He worked effortlessly with years of experience to dress the vines, knowing intuitively which needed to be discarded & which needed to be reintroduced into the plant. He'd run his hands along the vines counting new buds with his fingers, and then cut in the exact spot which would leave the plant the best chance for future growth & fruit-bearing.

The man watching looked out over the vineyard at a sea of plants growing for many years. Each season this Vinedresser came out, sang & talked to each plant, dressing them for the fruit-bearing season to come. It must've taken so long, but it seemed not to matter to the Vinedresser, it was a labor of love.

Isn't that a good picture of God? Taking the time, lovingly pruning & shaping to produce a greater amount of His character each year? Pruning. Tucking. Tying. Talking. Singing. Patient. Joyful. A picture of God attentive, loving & peaceful, tending our growth. God at work in us.

This is an image with which the disciples would've been familiar. Turn with me to John 15 where Jesus speaks of the Vine & the Branches. Perhaps Jesus was walking along the road on His way to the Garden of Gethsemane passing by a vineyard as He said these words. Or, perhaps He was passing by the Temple pointing to the golden vine on the front symbolizing Israel as He said it.

The fruit vine had always been a symbol of Israel (Ps. 80; Isa 5; Jer. 2). Growing up in that region these guys would have a working understanding of vine dressing. That's the picture John paints in chapter 15 of his gospel. Jesus as Vine, Father as Vinedresser. A picture which some of us may have read in the past & been filled with a little fear.

The question we automatically ask is, am I the one cut away? However, I think this is much more of a picture of a loving Father pruning his people to future growth - a positive image of a loving God, loving His people.

John 15, starting in v1 says this...*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.*

*<sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch & withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

*<sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit & so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments & abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

What is the fruit God desires? Is it merely the avoidance of sin? Or, is spiritual purity more than just mere avoidance? Is it the list of fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5 - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?

I think so...and Isaiah 5:7 gives us an even greater glimpse...*<sup>7</sup>The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.*

The fruit God desires is obedience, righteousness & justice. In short, it's the reflection of His character in individuals & church naturally producing the fruit we see in Galatians 5. It's not merely the individuals avoidance of carnal sin, but the heart of righteousness, love & justice displayed in community. The heart of obedience in following the voice of God.

Israel apparently didn't produce that fruit, maybe somewhat at times, but never fully. These issues of justice, righteousness & obedience were never fully realized. And as a result Israel was often overrun by her enemies, suffering the consequences of her disobedience.

Fruit's mentioned 8 times in this chapter with a clear progression each time. Fruit in vs 2. More fruit also in vs 2. Then much fruit in vv. 5 & 8. We're not familiar with vine-dressing, we live in a world where we buy our products from a grocery store. Instant gratification, which leaves no appreciation for the time, hard work, effort & love it takes

to nurture a vine to fruit bearing, developing it to increase over years. We chow down on grapes, or gulp down wine like there's no limit to it. So, to understand that process, I've found some steps which it takes to grow a grape vine, listen to these steps...

**Step 1:** Allow the grape vine to grow wild the first year. Having abundant stems & leaves develops a strong root system on immature grape vines. No pruning the first year.

**Step 2:** Select the strongest & most vigorous stem during the winter of the first year. Using bypass pruners, remove all the other stems at the base of the plant, as close to the trunk on the main stem as possible. Stake the remaining stem which will become the trunk of the plant. Use a grape stake, or secure the vine along a fence with wire.

**Step 3:** Allow stems to grow from the main trunk. In the spring of the second year, begin removing all but two of the very best side shoots which grow from the trunk. If the vine isn't branching where you want it too, pinch the top of the main trunk to encourage side branching.

**Step 4:** Cut back the top of the trunk during midsummer of the second year, when the vine reaches the desired height. The process of tip pruning will force new growth along the main trunk. Remove any new branches which don't fit your plan.

**Step 5:** Cut back all but the desired side branches & the main trunk during the second winter. What you have now is the basic frame for the plant - an upright stem with two sets of side branches.

**Step 6:** Allow the vine to grow during the third spring & summer, removing anything that grows from the trunk. You want to retain the basic framework of the vine.

**Step 7:** Leave 12 buds along each of the arms during the third winter. Pruning during the third winter is crucial to future fruit production. These 12 are the buds which will produce fruit during the 4th summer. Each of the 12 should have 1-2 leaf joints so that the vine looks like a stubby hat rack when you're finished pruning. These are called 'renewal buds' & will remain on the plant forever.

**Step 8:** Prune the 12 renewal buds so there's always one more bud growing from the tip. This practice will continue from the fourth winter onward. What you're doing is allowing the renewal buds to extend & grow one bud length every season. During the summer, the fruit develops on the new growth which springs from the renewal bud. Keeping them short during the dormant season keeps the plants under control.

So you can see, vine-dressing is a long drawn out process of growth & development. Jesus uses this metaphor with the Disciples, to emphasize the growth process happens over many years. The Vinedresser's methodical, well thought out & practiced, as he makes cuts & tucks. There's a lot of growth in the first year, but it's almost wild & uncontrollable. Does that feel like your experience? It does mine.

Then comes the drastic cutting back, a painful process to say the least, but it's all for the goal of making the plant as fruitful as can be in the future. I've had that cutting back in

my life - times were my pride & arrogance has had to be addressed. Notice it's not until the fourth year a plant begins to produce fruit. And it wasn't until years into my walk with Christ that He started to use me in ministry to others in greater ways, I had to grow into it. And even after this, only one additional bud is allowed to grow every year afterwards - the growth may be painstakingly slow, but when controlled by the Vinedresser it produces the most abundant & sweetest fruit.

Likewise, we always have delusions of grandeur, we want to be seen for great things right away, but growth happens over time. We methodically grow to bear fruit for the Vinedresser throughout life. Ministry's seen in the small progressive steps of love, justice, righteousness & obedience over a long period of time.

Janet Hagberg in her book, *The Critical Journey*, outlines six stages of faith which we go through as we continue to abide in Jesus. Yet she points out that after stage four we usually hit a necessary wall we must go through to further develop. Stages which reflect this process of vine-dressing.

The six stages of faith & the Wall are all important in our spiritual journey. Each one has a profound impact & role in our lives. For instance...

**Stage One** - recognition of God in Jesus -humbles us - Faith is discovering God

**Stage Two** - the life of discipleship - grounds us - Faith is learning about God

**Stage Three** - the productive life - rewards us - Faith is working for God

**Stage Four** - the journey inward - unsettles us - Faith is rediscovering God

**The Wall** - unmasks us - Our will faces God's will

**Stage Five** - the journey outward - transforms us - Faith is surrendering to God

**Stage Six** - the life of love - transcends us - Faith is reflecting God

Time doesn't allow us to outline each stage & what happens in the life of the Believer. However, you can download the sermon text for today at [sixeight.org](http://sixeight.org) - the six stages of faith will be at the end of it along with our church values & a description of what a mature believer looks like relevant to these stages & our values.

We must admit that if left alone, the plant would either die, or flounder along, not producing fruit, choked out by weeds & overgrowth. So the spiritual formation process is necessary, although sometimes painful. Jesus says, abide in Him as the Vine, allowing the Vinedresser to prune & shape you (Hebrews 12).

Yet, we must address our question of fear, what does He mean by the cutting off? Who's cut off? Can I lose my salvation? If I don't measure up & live rightly, will I be cut off? Isn't this a works based relationship then? What happened to grace?

Let's explore those questions a bit...every year in Palestine gardeners prune their vines. They cut off the dead wood which has no life in it & trim the living branches so that their

yield will be greater. Jesus says here, 'Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He cuts off'.

The phrase "in Me" doesn't mean the same thing as Paul's words "in Christ." Here it's part of a metaphor of the Vine & seems to mean, "every person who professes to be My disciple (a 'branch') isn't necessarily a true follower."

A branch which bears no fruit is obviously dead. Therefore, like Judas wasn't a true believer, it's cut off. The disciples had been cleansed by Jesus & His message, but Judas wasn't (cf. 13:10-11).<sup>1</sup> And you'll remember they just came out of the upper room where it seems that Judas, although spending all that time with Jesus, hadn't exhibited true faith in Him. A working knowledge of Jesus doesn't necessarily translate to a relationship with Him.

Fruitfulness is the result of the Son's life being reproduced in a disciple. The disciple's part is to abide, or remain. The word remain/abide, is a key word in John's theology. It occurs 11 times in this chapter, 40 times in the entire Gospel & 27 times in John's epistles. What does it mean to remain or abide?

It can mean, first, to believe in Jesus as Savior (cf. 6:54, 56). Second, it can mean to continue or persevere in believing (8:31 ["hold" is remain]; 1 John 2:19, 24), hence the stages of faith. Third, it can also mean believing, in other words loving obedience (John 15:9-10), also seen in the stages of faith. Without faith, no life of God will come to anyone. Without the life of God, no real fruit can be produced - *'Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me'*.<sup>2</sup>

This isn't a threat of judgment, rather a telling of a simple reality. We can't partake of the benefits of Christ unless we're part of him. The branch can't bear fruit if it cuts itself off from the vine, which is what Judas did from the beginning. In Chapter 14 we had the presentation of His Grace. In Chapter 15, we see what our responsibility is to that Grace. The vine had been an image of Israel & in contrast here, Jesus says He's the true Vine, one must be rooted in Him, not Israel, if one is to bear fruit for the Father. The branches taken away were never properly abiding in the vine. The ones which bear fruit are pruned through the Word, not removed. The Word's a cleansing force. It condemns sin, inspires holiness, promotes growth & reveals power for victory.

Some believe the Greek verb commonly translated 'takes away', is more accurately translated 'lifts up' - like our vine-dresser was doing. The Father lifts unproductive vines off of the ground as is common in vine dressing, tucking & tying them back into the larger plant that they may get more sun & bear fruit. So, dead branches, ones that never fully abided in the vine in the first place are taken away, yet unproductive vines are

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<sup>1</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Jn 15:3). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>2</sup> Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Jn 15:4). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

tended & lifted up to produce fruit. Fruit bearing is impossible without abiding & inevitable with abiding, which implies inherent reproduction. Reproduction being the fruit falling to the ground dying to itself & seeding a new plant. Fruit bearing in reference to spreading the gospel to all people-groups is our greatest & most central calling as Christians. We see that in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 - so fruit-bearing is not a self-centered endeavor, it has purpose to bring all other people groups into the knowledge of & faith in Christ.

Therefore, in looking at this picture we can say, yes, Paul was right when he said in Philippians 2:12-13...*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear & trembling, <sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you, both to will & to work for his good pleasure.*

As we abide, true fruit-bearing is determined over an extended period of time. Genuine conversion isn't measured by a hasty decision, but by long-range growth & fruitfulness, which we also see conveyed in the Parable of the Soils in Matthew 13. We don't struggle or strive to bear fruit, we just abide.

My parents had an apple orchard. I'd never once heard those trees struggle, complain, or groan to bear apples. Branches don't struggle to produce fruit. But I have seen them unproductive when untended. I have seen Christians struggling & straining to change their character in their human strength - we call that legalism. It never works, the old character will emerge & dominate. The only way we can bear fruit, which is love defined by joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, righteousness, justice & faith, the reproduction of Jesus in others, or sincere expressions of praise & generous giving, is to abide in Christ.

The apple branch just hangs off the tree year after year. And in due season, the blossoms come & apples appear. There's fruit, because it abides in the tree. Abide in Jesus & as the days turn into weeks, turn into months, turn into years, we'll see fruit, more fruit, then much fruit. And you'll be surprised, the fruit will naturally happen from your abiding in Christ, just enjoying Jesus. Profoundly simple.

No one's more miserable than the Christian who, for a time, hedges in obedience. They don't love sin enough to enjoy its pleasures, and don't love Christ enough to relish holiness. They perceive their rebellion iniquitous, but obedience seems distasteful. They are to be pitied & he can't remain ambivalent for long. Jesus wants all of us.

The result of abiding is joy. Christ's joy isn't the pleasure of a life of ease, it's the exhilaration of being right with God & consciously walking in His love & care. Jesus is the Vine, life flows through Him, as we are planted in the Word, drawing living water & nutrients up from the soil for the sole purpose of producing fruit - all that nutrient

builds up in the fruit. What's brought into our lives is purified through the process of soaking up through the Vine - Jesus purifies his people as we abide in Him.

I used to have a dog, Raja, I wasn't fond of him. Yet I love my wife! And she'd grow the most beautiful garden outside my back door. All kinds of flowers & vegetables which we enjoyed, both to look at & eat. However, that's also the place my dog went to the bathroom. Here's how my brain works, it's nasty, and I don't mean to sound juvenile, but I think about these things. Raja peed in the yard. My vegetables grow in the yard. Hence, I'm eating Rajas pee! I couldn't get it out of my head! But I wasn't. Because the process of filtration through the soil & up through that vine takes out any & all impurity!

We are rooted in Christ, He's the Vine & planted in the soil of His word we're purified. Abide & live in Him...over time, He produces fruit in us with no effort of our own, other than enjoying Him. The Vinedresser prunes & shapes, it's not my business which is cut off, which is pruned, or which is lovingly tucked back into the fold. It is His. My job's to abide under His loving care, no matter how painful pruning may be to eventually bear fruit for the Vinedresser.

Listen to the truth of this quote from a book called, *Lessons from a Venetian Vinedresser*, Robert Scott Stiner...*"To care for the branches in such a way [individual trimming] is to know exactly what each one needs & this vinedresser loves the process as much as the product. Each season, the branches become stronger & more stable & produce better fruit as the relationship between the vinedresser, the vine & the branches grows."*

Many strive to avoid sin, we fight to live this Christian life on our own, we spin our wheels in legalism. We look at the spiritual formation process in the negative, "If I don't do this, I'm okay." But Jesus says look at this in the positive, "Abide in Me, soak Me up, live in Me." Which is why Paul wisely says in Galatians 5:16...<sup>16</sup>*So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.* It's a matter of perspective, am I looking at my temptations, or Jesus? My circumstances, or Jesus? It's why Jesus said...*"Whoever abides in me & I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."*

So, to reiterate...walking with Jesus closely, drawing nutrients & living water from Him throughout our lives does a few things...it produces the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It produces a people filled with righteousness, justice & obedience. And it reproduces this life of Christ in others extending to all people groups of the world!



## Questions for Study

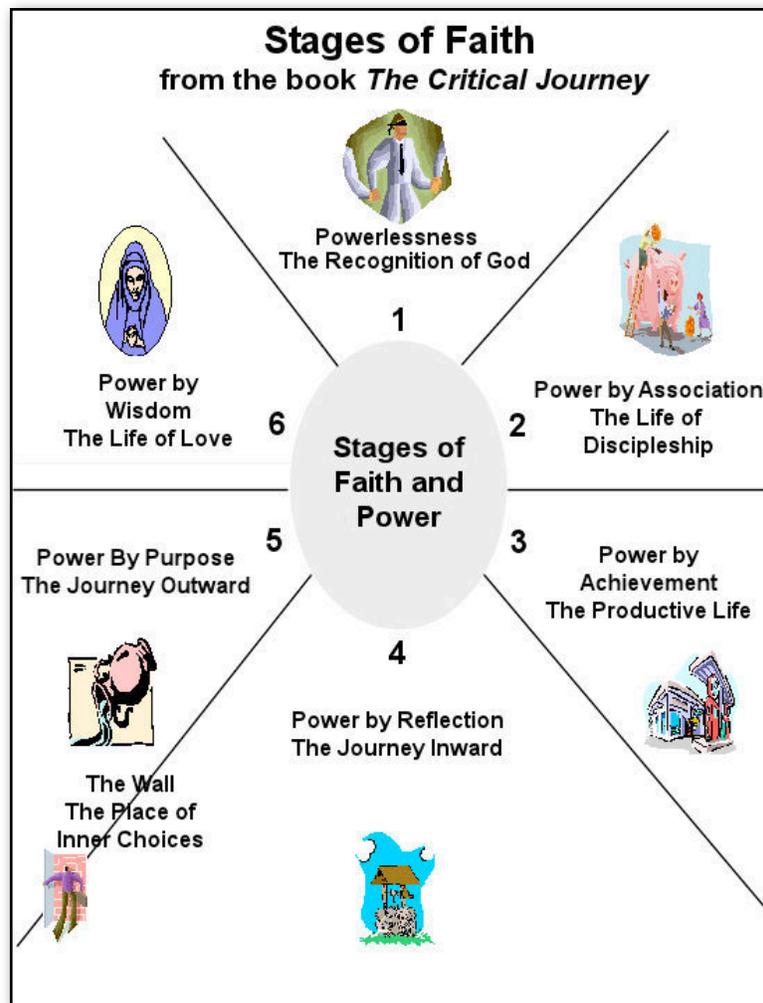
1. Icebreaker: Our sermon today is about the vine and branches. Do you have a green thumb? If so, what do you enjoy growing? If not, what's something you enjoy seeing grow?
2. Pray
3. What about this sermon and this passage stands out to you? Why?
4. Jason mentioned a great spiritual growth resource in his sermon and attached material about it with the sermon this week; Janet O'Hagberg's "The Critical Journey." Take a look at the material (before group) and consider it. Does a certain stage of faith resonate with your current place in life? Do you have any questions about it?
5. How do you abide in Christ? What does that practically look like for you? Has it changed at all in this particular season of separation and coronavirus?
6. Pray for one another. Pray for all of us to abide in Christ and for our church to yield lots of branches and growth in the Kingdom for years to come!

# Stages of Faith and Spiritual Formation

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*The Critical Journey*

## Opening Questions

1. Do you see yourself as having gone through stages in your faith?
2. What have they looked like? And if you could name them what would they be called?
3. What would the final stage of your spiritual formation look like? What would you 'be' like?
4. To what stage does typical church life get us to? Is Leadership the pinnacle stage? Is there something beyond it?
5. What is our charge as leadership, what is our task? To make church people, or make disciples?
6. If you are an earlier stage, can you help someone along that is in a later stage? How important is your spiritual formation? Have you reached your ceiling? Or, is this more about your formation?
7. What would 'church' look like, and how would our 'vision' be impacted if we had more at the later stages?



### **We need all the stages of faith for full spiritual formation.**

The six stages of faith and the Wall that are highlighted in *The Critical Journey* are all important in our spiritual journey. Each one has a profound impact and role in our lives. For instance,

- Stage One humbles us
- Stage Two grounds us
- Stage Three rewards us
- Stage Four unsettles us
- The Wall un.masks us
- Stage Five transforms us
- Stage Six transcends us

Each stage is active in us and even though our “home” stage is at one of them, we need the others for the gifts they bring us as well. Our home stage is the stage at which we are residing at this time; where we spend more of our time and energy at this point in our lives.

An example of the intermingling of stages is a person whose home stage is Stage Four and for whom the questions are more prevalent than the answers. Although the sureness of Stage Two is elusive at this time, the sense of belonging and community that Stage Two represents is still vital to a person at Stage Four, since too much isolation at this stage can stunt the journey.

### **The same activity may have a different effect at each stage of faith**

The following suggestions for spiritual formation are designed to support people at each of the home stages. The idea is to present things that will support them at their current stage and give them a glimpse of the next stage that is developing within them.

The suggestions for each stage are not intended to imply that the same activities do not work for people at other home stages, only that the impact will be felt more deeply for the person at that stage.

### **The developmental aspect of the stages**

While we are able to access isolated experiences and ideas from each stage, even those stages that are farther along on the journey, we are able to fully integrate only our current home stage and those stages through which we have passed. The stage directly ahead of us is enticing and challenging. However, those stages that are two ahead of our current home stage seem too unusual, undesirable or difficult to be accessible.

### **Questions for Reflection...**

8. When have I experienced this stage? How did I move?
9. What does the church look like at this stage? What are the major issues?
10. What is my heart’s deepest desire? How does it connect with my work at church, if at all?
11. What would our leadership need to do to move our church to the stage of power we most desire?

12. How would our vision be changed, if at all, by this move?
13. What would each individual need to do to support that vision?

## Home Stage One: Recognition of God

Faith is discovering God

### Role of this stage in the life of faith

Humbles us. This stage reminds us of the awesome power of God and the finiteness of our lives. We come by either awe or need. It can be a peak event. Sometimes it is very concrete and datable, but sometimes it is a slow growing romance. It requires no study, or prerequisites, and happens naturally. Although, many times for adults it is a very conscious act. Sometimes at this stage we mistake humility, and a low sense of worth.

### Characteristics

- A sense of awe
  - Children usually come through a sense of Awe
  - Experiential rather than rational
  - Nature & other profound life experiences may drive it
  - Feels very safe and comfortable
- A sense of need
  - Adults usually come through need
  - Psalm 23, 'The Lord is My Shepherd, I shall not want' speaks loudly here
- A natural awareness, felt more through our senses
  - Nature can be influential
  - A quest for greater meaning in life
- A sense of innocence
  - We trust, are truthful, open and loving
  - We naively think everyone can experience this easily

### Spiritual Formation Activities

#### Focus

Comfort, nurturing and clarity

#### Books, classes

Bible studies, classes, books that help answer questions,

#### Activities, groups, involvement

Group support for comfort, nurturing, grieving, telling our stories, forgiveness, conversion, and renewal. Healing and prayer ministries are helpful too, especially if the person had a wounding experience within a religious setting.

### Leaders, mentors:

Mentors/guides who can help us choose activities/relationships that will answer questions. Those who can help comfort and console. Referrals may be necessary (grief

counseling, treatment, healing ministries). It would be helpful for people in this stage to start thinking about community and belonging, how that would look for them, and what it asks of them as well.

### **Travel:**

Trips that allows us to affirm faith; the Holy Land for instance.

### **Worship, music:**

Worship that is clear, comforting, and unambiguous. For some the spoken word is most important, for others symbols, Eucharist, physical movement, confession, or devotional music. The transcendent (God is bigger than everything) is appreciated.

### **What to expect from them and others**

Low expectation that a person at this stage will be able to give back or reach out at this time. The attention is to our own needs and God's response. There is a growing dependence on the family of faith.

### **Stuckness:**

Martyr behavior, enduring sense of failure, worthlessness, spiritual bankruptcy, ignorance, spiritual superstitions, anger, lashing out, passive/aggressive behavior, self abasement, want control and are afraid of losing it, inadequacy, and trust can turn to distrust.

They need to become a part of a strong group, accept self-worth, reduce isolation, find someone to follow, and move on to the next stage. Moving stages is difficult.

### **Questions:**

- 1. Do you remember being in this stage? What happened, what was it like?**
- 2. Do you know someone in this stage?**

## **Home Stage Two: The Life of Discipleship**

Faith is learning about God

### **Role of this stage in the life of faith**

Grounds us. This stage represents the best of community, no matter what our circumstances. Community binds us together in love and care for one another. This is a time of learning and belonging. We are apprentices and soak up from others we trust. A time to be with others but it is a one way street (dependent).

### **Characteristics**

- Gets meaning from belonging
  - nice to be with others on the same journey and who understand
  - 'We' vs 'They' mentality emerges and we are more comfortable with the 'We'
  - Group gives identity and security or even groups within groups
- Answers found in a leader, cause, or belief system

- Not confident in self to know what to believe or even how to learn about God
- Learning to follow the instruction of others
- May see the cause or leader as the answer and are disillusioned when others don't
- Comfort in knowing someone will show me the way
- Wants sense of rightness and security in their faith
  - Characterized by the statement - I found IT
- Comfortable - we trust and want to rely on others
- We are starting to put something on the experience of stage 1

## **Spiritual Formation Activities**

### **Focus**

A sense of community; activities that foster belonging, close connections with people

### **Books, classes**

Bible studies, classes, books related to seeking, right living, belief systems, creeds, disciplines, living in community, sharing gifts, giving back, study of Bible in depth, study of faith stages, integrating faith and work/life, study of social outreach/social justice issues.

### **Activity, groups, involvement**

Group support for study, or sharing our faith and life journey with others. Home retreats would be helpful as well as Koininia groups. Connecting faith with life and work; classes designed to connect faith and work issues, assessment, reflection. Then reaching out to try out experiences at work, in the community, in volunteer work, in social justice issues. Involvement on church committees, urban plunges, mission trips, outreach to other organizations.

### **Leaders, mentors**

Strong leaders who share "the way", or our credo. For instance, being more like Jesus. Mentors, guides who can help them sort out who they are in the faith, and how they can develop, using self-assessment and gifts identification; Myers Briggs, Spiritual Life Inventory, Search Institute Mature Faith Inventory, other faith inventories. Those who can support and encourage them through difficult times.

### **Travel**

Trips to local, national and international places/activities that stretch our idea of what it means to be a person of faith in the world.

### **Worship, music:**

Worship that encourages right living, following precepts, belonging to community, confession and forgiveness, living out one's faith in the world. Symbols, scents, visual images all resonate with believers. Strong Scripture base things are trusted. Hymns that are familiar and give messages of inspiration are appreciated. Contemporary music with movement awakens the word for many. Prevalent message: God is with us and for us.

### **What to expect from parishioners**

This group seeks regular involvement in the church and seeks opportunities to give back or reach out to help others at this time. They give time and money, they seek out social activities, and they get their children involved.

### **Stuck-ness**

Legalistic, moralistic, rigidity, punishment of offenders becomes obsessive, everyone should do faith/life like I do, faith by negation, we (good) vs. they (bad), become switchers when our expectations are not met, fear. At Stage 1 we feel wrong and weak, at Stage 2 we feel right and strong. Outside success in life for these people creates a difficult situation for them to grow further - when they cannot see their further need, they tend to think they are able to lead and direct others when they actually need to grow further. They will struggle with obedience to spiritual authorities and they will view decisions by others as irrelevant and wrong; distrust of others is evident here since others do not seem as 'successful'. Success is more important than the spiritual formation process to them. "God has blessed me, I must be more spiritually mature than others." Their lack of outward need drives a pride that can be insidious and damaging.

They need to recognize their uniqueness, start to identify gifts, start to see themselves as a contributor, seek responsibility, learn obedience in community - so we need to take risks and accept our gifting and get over fears of rejection to move onto Stage 3.

### **Questions:**

- 1. Do you remember being in this stage? What happened, what was it like?**
- 2. Do you know someone in this stage?**

## **Home Stage Three: The Productive Life**

Faith is working for God

### **Role of this stage in the life of faith**

Rewards us. This stage represents the best of our gifts and talents, and allows us to use them with confidence; to do the work we love to do. This is the doing stage. Women may find this a painful stage if their church holds them back due to their gender. But for others this is a great stage, very productive, we feel like everything is going well, etc.

### **Characteristics:**

- Values uniqueness in the community
  - sometimes to a point of self-centeredness
- Responsibility
  - leadership roles or positions are taken at this time
- Value placed on symbols of accomplishment, or a spiritual goal reached
  - responsibility, authority, recognition, accomplishments, titles, praise from others, influence, respect, allegiance

- We may express our success in other areas of life here as an expression of the strength of our faith - to be successful means to be faithful

## **Spiritual formation activities**

### **Focus**

Finding my unique gifts and contributions in order to be productive

### **Books, classes**

Bible studies, classes, books that help people connect with their gifts and how those can be used in the church and the world. Finding MY unique contribution to church and the world and doing it, even leading others who are participating.

### **Activities, groups, involvement**

Leadership opportunities, goal oriented ministries, outreach to further God's cause, leading or getting more deeply involved with mission trips or community programs, serving as leaders of church boards, hospitality activities, council, confirmation, book or Bible studies, Sunday school, social justice/outreach projects.

## **Leaders, mentors**

Mentors, guides to assist in self-assessment; leadership assessment, training, Spiritual Life Inventory, other faith assessments, gift assessment. May begin mentoring others. Introducing the concept of a quiet spirit through centering activities, or ritual, is important at this time. Opportunities that allow for a balance of action and reflection. Introduce the concept of solitude in a non-threatening way. Those who can help support them through difficult times

## **Travel**

Trips that allow us to use our gifts and live out our leadership in faith; we might co-lead a mission trip, start an outreach group, bring supplies to others who are on a special mission.

## **Worship/Music**

Worship that equips people to serve, allows them to feel good about their contribution, encourages them, gives the feeling of God's power. Symbols, rituals that reinforce our right relationship, like commissioning services, are appreciated. Music that gives us messages of energy and power, power to do something with our lives; to serve, to lead. Theatrical and musical productions that involve us and use our gifts fully.

## **What to expect from parishioners**

High expectation that a person at this stage will be active, give back, or reach out at this time. The attention is to our own, and other's need, and God's response.

## **Stuckness:**

Weary in well-doing, burn out, feel unappreciated, indispensable, competition, playing God, over zealous and make others squirm. No one can be around us without hearing

our stories and to be converted. Hard to fend off, leave battle scars on others. We believe strongly that others need what we have and will not rest until they do. We demand personal acceptance of and participation in our experience, that makes us feel successful in our faith. We take credit in saving others from their own horrible fate. The more success, the more self-centered, and self worship takes hold. We are devastated when not chosen for projects, or assignments. Our insecurities feed off of others rallying around us and it balances our unacknowledged fears. We try and do it all even though it is God's work. We put our desires in the place of God's and call it his will. Life becomes an act, and we cannot be vulnerable or look weak. That would mean a loss of control. Our facade grows as we become angry with God and fearful of being 'found out'. Need to remember that everyone that is in constant motion is not necessarily productive.

The certainty of Stage 3 gets lost with the uncertainty and questioning of Stage 4. We to let the questions come instead of denying them (faith and doubt questions). We need to continue to seek support as we move into 4 even though four is very solitary. Usually this movement to 4 happens with a crisis in life or faith. It usually renders most or all that we have trusted as inadequate or inappropriate to answer our questions - it moves into a slow deep questioning of faith and God. We may feel the sense of the loss of God as we move forward. Those that help become more narrow here - only those that have gone through it seem to understand - very little seems certain. Grief accompanies this transition of stages. Our spiritual integrity comes into question. Stay connected. To grow accomplished people we need to look past their accomplishments. Accomplishment is not necessarily indicative of spiritual growth. We need to shift church culture away from accomplishment and onto spiritual growth.

### **Questions:**

- 1. Do you remember being in this stage? What happened, what was it like?**
- 2. Do you know someone in this stage?**

## **Home Stage Four: The Journey Inward**

Faith is rediscovering God

### **Role of this stage in the life of faith**

Unsettles us. This stage represents the times when we are called to a new awareness and a time of questioning; questioning faith, God, church, our experience of the Holy, or our confidence. It is truly the journey inward. Our spiritual life up to this point was largely outward although things were happening inward they were focused more on our accomplishments. We look hopeless at this stage, dance around the issues, fall apart, doubt, explore and question. These are the vertical people. Few models are available and we are not informed or taught this but it comes from a deep inward journey. At the end of stage 4 we hit The Wall, a face to face encounter with God and our own will.

**CAUTION:** There may be several stages that appear to be similar, which can be confusing.

## Characteristics

- Life or faith crisis
  - No natural tendency to move to this stage
  - it does not look like something that should be happening in faith
- Loss of certainties in life and faith
  - for the first time faith and life don't seem to work
  - feel remote, unsuccessful, immobilized, hurt, ashamed, or reprehensible
  - we can feel stumped, angry, hurting, betrayed, abandoned, unheard or unloved
- A search for direction, not answers
- Pursuit of personal integrity in relation to God
- Releasing God from the box
  - lonely stage and leads to frustration
  - those that want solace and security will get stuck our drop out here
  - God is not who we thought he was
  - we fight this change of seeing who God really is since there is a lot of comfort in who we have made him to be
  - moving away from collective belief systems brings more loneliness and tension
- Apparent loss of faith
  - danger in giving up here
  - life of faith may feel like a fraud or a mirage
  - gnawing questions of doctrines and infallibility we cannot deny anymore come here
  - something we have held onto crumbles
  - we look outside of ourselves for more inner control which brings more confusion and pain
  - This hunger increases but we are doubting the very core of our belief and self-actualization
  - answers of spiritual power or control have a hollow ring and we crave something more personal and fulfilling
  - we are no longer seeking an answer
  - Need to give up our well worn defenses and become vulnerable

## Spiritual formation activities

### Focus

The questions and uncertainties instead of the answers

### Books, classes

Bible studies, classes, books that raise questions, are holistic, encourage a search for faith, life, church, meaning. No ready answers. But a willingness to consider a "Calling," a vocation in life/work. May require time to be inward, and not outward.

### Activities, groups, involvement

Reflection opportunities: retreats, quiet rooms, personal/musing newsletters, inner journey classes, dance, solitude, icons, poetry, body work, lives of saints, journaling, nature, art, music, clay, fairy tales, stories (especially our own story);

all with an intent of deepening the journey, or addressing one's calling, or unanswered questions.

### **Leaders, mentors**

Spiritual direction or pastoral counseling; safe places to explore faith as a process, prayer and discernment as central to transformation. Self-assessment that allows for deeper meaning; Enneagram, SLI with counseling.

May serve as mentors, guides to others by being trained in the inner journey. May wish to be trained as a spiritual director. Lead self-assessment; leadership assessment, gifts training, (with a quiet spirit using centering activities or ritual). Make a goal to have a balance of action and reflection. Supervision is vital and necessary for anyone who is walking with another on their spiritual journey.

### **Travel**

Pilgrimages to holy places, reflective spaces, retreat centers, international healing sites.

### **Worship, music:**

Worship as an absorption of mystery, love, hope. Words or music that deepen, ask probing questions, quiet us down, ask us to ponder. Chanting is one example. One word or a line of music is worship. Relates to God as personal, imminent. Personal ritual is especially meaningful at this stage.

### **What to expect from parishioners**

Expectation that this person will be less active, although they will give back in their own unique way. They are guided by inner reflection and seeking out their vocation or their calling.

### **Stuckness**

Unable to reach out or in, continue questioning, revert to safe place, drop out (or try to revert to earlier stages), we go to everything but are closed off below the surface, ever learning but not coming to truth, consumed by self-assessment (finding self and not faith), we want to know things about self that do not force us to give up will, we want the answers to be less difficult and personally confrontative. We want something to reason through rather than feel, or something to feel rather than reason through. Self-growth becomes an idol although it appears good on the outside. We experience a lack of or loss of intimacy with self and others. We may still engage in groups but still hide for the fear of being found out. We reach inward and are unable to reach outward. Feeling would be too painful, we want to be healed but don't think it will happen to us.

We need to let go of self. Need to come to a deeper awareness of our weaknesses, and then we can see, feel, smell, touch and experience God and become intimate with him in the fullness of the sense. We need to accept God's purpose for our lives. Seek wholeness through personal healing and be willing to commit to whatever it takes. We can move on to let God be God in his way. We are not crippled by our weaknesses and faults and in our brokenness we are willing to let God use us in any way he chooses. We are being

asked to be selfless and need to give up the search for self and in doing so we will find self. We are asked to lean into our fears and find new certainty in who God really is. Life will never be the same as we move onto Stage 5 - the cost of obedience.

## The WALL

Our will faces God's will

### **Role of this stage in the life of faith**

Unmasks us. This stage represents the deep journey of healing our darkness and uncovering God's will in our lives. Stage One sometimes feels like a Wall and it is usually a precursor to this deeper uncovering.

### **Characteristics**

- Knowing it is time to face the truth
- Letting God's will be your will
- Uncovering your deepest secrets, fears, wounds
- Considering unconditional love
- Feeling like you are in the muck

### **Spiritual formation activities**

#### **Focus**

The inner journey through the darkness

#### **Books, classes**

Biblical references to help face deepest fears, the dark night of the soul, transformation. Hearing other people's stories of moving through the darkness, guides for discernment. An ongoing willingness to hear a "Calling" coming from this darkness, although almost impossible at times. Issues that usually need addressing are God images, childhood wounds, painful unhealed experiences, violence, abuse, unresolved loss and grief.

#### **Activities, groups, involvement**

Reflection opportunities: retreats, quiet rooms, personal musing, newsletters. All other activities may need to be curtailed, or designed carefully by the individual, and the people who are guiding this journey, all with an intent of healing the person or addressing deeper issues or unanswered questions. Rituals are most effective in the healing process; burying old hurts, forgiveness rituals, divorce services, letters of amends, grieving losses etc.

### **Leaders, mentors**

Spiritual direction, or pastoral counseling, and therapy, are helpful for safe transformation; safe places to explore faith as a process, prayer as central to transformation. Self- assessment that allows for deeper meaning; Enneagram, psychological tests.

As they move through the healing process they make good mentors, guides to others , or trained spiritual directors. May do some leading of assessment activities. Supervision is vital and necessary for anyone leading another in a spiritually deepening experience.

### **Travel**

Pilgrimages to holy places or reflective spaces may facilitate a breakthrough. Involving a ritual is exceptionally helpful.

### **Worship, music**

Worship may not hold much meaning during a WALL experience. They may have to ask others to pray because they may be unable to at this time. Music that has special healing properties or brings solace is helpful. Touch may be the most important sense to use—a shawl around one's shoulders, someone washing our feet.

### **What to expect from parishioners**

Not much involvement, but if there is, it is at a level of healing activity, mentoring or spiritual direction.

### **Stuckness**

Denial, revert to safety, abandon faith.

### **Questions:**

- 1. Do you remember being in stage 4 or the Wall? What happened, what was it like?**
- 2. Do you know someone in this stage?**

## **Stage Five: The Journey Outward**

Faith is surrendering to God

### **Role of this stage in the life of faith**

Transforms us. This stage represents the working out of our calling, the calling that first became clear in the Wall. We are so moved by love, and by the freedom of healing and forgiveness, that we find ways to live that out with others.

### **Characteristics**

- A renewed sense of God's acceptance
- A new sense of the horizontal life
- Sense of calling, vocation or ministry
- Concern and focus on other's best interests
- A deep calm or stillness

### **Spiritual formation activities**

#### **Focus**

The horizontal life of following our calling/vocation

**Books, classes**

Individualized: They have learned what keeps them connected to God, and they have developed disciplines that are part of their lives, those that promote inner calm and clarity. They focus on God's love and on ministry in everyday life. They live out of their Center and are natural healers. Prayer is their way of life. Forgiveness and reconciliation are their bywords. They are clear about their calling. And they have let go of their anger and grief over past wounds.

**Activities, groups, involvement**

Any faith community needs to find, support and utilize these people as much as possible. They will be the grounded base for the ongoing development of the community's activities and the leadership training component, which is crucial. Spiritual direction and supervision are vital and necessary for people who live at this stage especially if they are to be involved in any leadership positions.

**Leaders, mentors**

Mentoring: They would be good at training other mentors, acting as spiritual directors or supervisors of others. They also work well behind the scenes, like one-on-one work, or projects that support others to do their work. They are good at gently challenging others if needed, acting as healers, training others to be spiritual healers, or co-journeying with leaders as part of a support system. They may enjoy planning rituals of healing.

**Travel**

They would make excellent leaders or participants of any travel experience.

**Worship, music**

Worship takes on meaning that is unique to each individual. Intimacy is more crucial than communal worship and community is appreciated. One's life begins to be a means of worship. One line of music may be sung/played over and over as a way to connect to the Holy. God is intimate.

**What to expect from parishioners**

Involvement in the deeper life of faith in ways that are individual and supportive of the ongoing calling of the person

**Stuckness**

Appears to be impractical or not caring about important things.

**Questions:**

- 1. Do you remember being in this stage? What happened, what was it like?**
- 2. Do you know someone in this stage?**

## Stage Six: The Life of Love

Faith is reflecting God

### Role of this stage in the life of faith

Transcends us. This stage represents not our work, our calling, our life, but the life we live in God. It is all about the transcendent life we live beyond ourselves but rooted in God.

### Correlation with the [Spiritual Life Inventory \(SLI\)](#):

They probably will be uninterested in taking this or any other test, not because they are not self reflective, but because they know themselves well now, and are not interested in being validated or recognized.

### Characteristics

- Christ-like living in total obedience to God
- Wisdom gained from life's struggles
- Compassionate living for others
- Life lived from underneath or on top
- Life abandoned

### Spiritual formation activities

#### Focus

Obedience and wisdom

#### Books, classes

Use them in the spiritual formation activities as wisdom figures. They have their own disciplines developed so they usually do not depend on programs for that, but they need to be allowed to connect, tell their stories, give, teach, or just "be."

#### Activities, groups involvement

They model intimacy with God and compassion in various manifestations. They work well behind the scenes, and in informal relationships. Encourage others to be involved with them in their ministries and in their lives. Let them be role models just by the way they are with people and with faith. All of their lives are ministry; this can be absorbed when you are around them.

### Leaders, mentors

They are role models for loving detachment and letting go. Since they are unafraid of death, their egos are not involved, and others can learn a lot from them. They would be good as informal or formal trainers, supervisors and supporters of others who do the front-line work.

### Travel

Use them in any way possible with people who are journeying into uncharted territory.

**Worship, music**

Their lives are examples of worship and intimate connection. Music is the language of their soul. Intimacy with God is the most important issue for them.

**What to expect from parishioners**

Modeling intimacy with God.

**Stuckness**

Appears to give up critical things, waste life, or neglect oneself.

**Questions:**

- 1. Do you remember being in this stage? What happened, what was it like?**
- 2. Do you know someone in this stage?**

**In conclusion:**

We need to ask ourselves at Six:Eight what does a spiritual formed person look like in light of our vision and values (See Vision & Values/Mature Christian Profile). We also need to remember that whole churches and ministries can be stuck at a stage. When this happens they start to lose people that grow past those stages. When we elect leadership that is unwilling to grow further, we dictate that we will stay at their stage; even one person at the leadership level can derail a church. Are we willing to grow further? Are we committed as leadership to the spiritual formation process ourselves? Do we see the value and urgency in how our personal spiritual formation is important in our relationship to God and community?

Do you know of a ministry or church that is like this?

Leadership is not the pinnacle of faith, you guys still have growth to occur in your lives. If more of our people were at the later stages there would be less desire to implement program and more relationship (low cost, high impact / low maintenance, high relationship). There would be natural connection with the outside community. We would organically reach each other and the outside community. We would be less busy, more contemplative, satisfied, light-hearted. We would be experiencing abundant life. Little things would not shake us, and we would be led more by the Spirit of God than our agenda. There would be patience in the process and deep discipleship occurring. Prayer and hearing the Holy Spirit would be very evident. People would not clamor for position, but see all of life as ministry, and live it out naturally.

Value Matrix (below) - what would people look like in light of our values at these different age groups and stages? How are we going to move ourselves and them forward?

## SIX:EIGHT VALUES

**Each value is defined on the following pages along with a description of what a mature Christian looks like in light of that value. These descriptions give a word picture of a person living in healthy spiritual formation relevant to the 6 stages of faith.**

### COMMUNITY MATTERS

Every person is infinitely valuable to God; we value people and what each person brings to the table. We welcome the curious, disillusioned, and the skeptic. Faith is an adventure to be lived; we are here to help each other on that journey. We intentionally seek to serve one another & the surrounding community in the practical love & message of Jesus. Our decisions together are based on faith, risk, and love. We are a prayerful community, led by the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures. We are externally focused, engaging the surrounding community mainly through *their* established avenues of service. Our commitment to community drives us to plant new families of faith as far as we can reach.

*Mature Christians in community are open, available, reliable, and sought for counsel. Positions of leadership are unimportant, and are taken with utmost humility. More importantly, they serve naturally out of a heart of God. Influence in relationship is more important than the institutional structure; the power of love vs. the love of power. They value others enough not to shy away from loving, healthy confrontation, and always seek reconciliation when needed. They are quick to admit their faulty heart and attitudes in situations. Even when things are very hard, there is a solid hope and realism exhibited by them. They do not isolate themselves from those outside the faith community; they realize the importance of bringing the Kingdom to others. Prayer, reliance on the Holy Spirit, and words/ideas which reflect God's Word, are indicative of their nature. As a result, they can easily and gently lead others in understanding their spiritual poverty and need for Christ. They serve where needed, not complaining, and seek communally beneficial answers on all issues. They see themselves less as an individual, and more a part of the family of faith - self is diminished. They may frustrate others since what is important to everyone else is not important to them - they are seeking God. They do not act alone or in isolation, but open themselves up to the grace and direction God offers through the faith community. Patience in the process of spiritual formation is evident in their lives with others. Out of grace they sacrifice themselves for others which sometimes looks illogical. They do not burn out and are very aware of their boundaries. They give freely in all ways.*

### GRACE MATTERS

Grace is the great distinctive of the Christian faith. Our regard for each other is born out of what we believe to be true of God as revealed in the story of Jesus. Therefore, we value authenticity, integrity, love, kindness, gentility, forgiveness, encouragement, serving others in sacrificial ways, etc. We value deeply Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself. We live dependent on God's grace daily.

*The mature Christian is deeply rooted in, and understanding of, God's Grace in their lives. This enables them to fail and not be crushed; it bolsters a sense of humor towards themselves and others even in difficult situations. It also drives them away from seeking things that 'puff up', such as position, power, or control. They love God completely; not compartmentalizing their lives, but wholly giving everything over to him. They love themselves correctly; having learned to ask themselves if they want to be healed, or want abundant life. They have learned to respond to the Holy Spirit in order to address their personal issues, and embrace the suffering necessary to experience that life. They also love others as themselves; having learned to look at others with dignity and grace, even when conflict happens. They treat others the way*

*God has treated them, and do not shy away from the negative consequences of sin and its repercussions in relationship. Forgiveness, clear communication, process, truth, the feelings of others, and reconciliation are paramount in their dealing with others. They have learned to ask the question of 'why' for themselves and others to address the idol of self in all situations; they do not make up 'rules to follow' but drive towards the deeper issue of grace in light of Christ.*

### **STORY MATTERS**

We are rooted in the Scriptures, the Story of a loving God pursuing his children. It is a story in four parts, what it was like (*creation*), what happened (*fall*), what it is like now (*redemption*), and what it will be (*restoration*). The central character is Jesus who lovingly bore in himself our judgment, and guides us by his timeless teaching. This story extends through his followers in history. It encompasses and speaks to all issues of life, restoring our relationship to God, and bringing freedom & joy where there was once none.

*The mature Christian in the issue of Story is not only knowledgeable of God's Word, but has allowed it to influence, and guide, all aspects of their life. They see themselves as rooted in the biblical story, which is larger than themselves, beginning in creation, and ending in the hope of restoration. They are not only able to 'quote' or lead a person to certain ideas or verses, but more importantly, are able to apply them in ways that are refreshing and challenging to the soul. Their world view is shaped by the story of God, how they view life, and reality; it is born out of this holistic story. They do not try to impress with their knowledge, but if one listens closely to the mature Christian, they can hear that their words are bolstered with the ideas and verses of Scripture. They no longer dwell on the elementary teachings, but have moved onto deeper issues of the faith. They do not try to impress, but are just 'being'.*

### **PASSION MATTERS**

In response to the grace extended through Jesus, we value a lifestyle of holistic passionate worship. We seek to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to him in all areas of life: corporately & individually. One experience of this can be found in our weekly gathering in which we strive to create an open, relaxed, interactive & creative atmosphere. However, our worship extends into *every aspect* of our personal lives in what we believe, value, how we live, think, and treat others. We avoid busyness, but work hard for the joy that has been set before us in Jesus. Our passion for worship extends to the holistic value of God's creation in its entirety.

*The mature Christian in the issue of passion sees all of life as their spiritual act of worship. They have grown past the empty notion that worship is found only in song on Sunday mornings. They value creation, people, and all of life. Their decisions, inner thoughts, and heart life, are all a sacrifice to God. They have come to realize that consistent good treatment of others, and how they interact with the Holy Spirit are more profoundly worshipful experiences than occasional 'worship gatherings'. They make Kingdom Choices, which may seem illogical on a worldly standard, and are based on their calling and Scripture. However, these choices are not in isolation, they are based on God's Word, interaction with the Holy Spirit, and the faith community. Worship and passion for God, as reflected in Christ, is a lifestyle, not an event for them. Their passionate worship in all areas drives them outward to take the good news to their neighbors, family and friends.*