

Maximum Faith, George Barna

FROM THE PREFACE

SIX YEARS OF RESEARCH

It took me six years to conduct and make sense of this research, and I think it explains many of the secret and sometimes confusing emotions, fears, experiences, disappointments, and frustrations that we encounter. Even more so, this research gives us a simple and practical explanation of where we stand on life's journey and what we must do to move forward to optimize our God-given potential. If you consider yourself to be a Christian, then yes, this book is meant for you. As a down payment on that claim, let me summarize where we will go in this book. At the risk of sounding presumptuous, this relatively brief volume might turn out to be one of the most helpful books you will read.

FROM THE INTRODUCTION

ALONG THE TRANSFORMATION JOURNEY

Based on research, how does God transform lives, and how do we work with Him to facilitate transformational outcomes? Here, in a skeletal form, is the basic argument, which I will then restate and unpack in practical ways as we go along. Life is a journey. Okay, big yawn; you already know that. But what you might not know — in fact, the research shows that few Christians in America do — is the itinerary for that journey: the stops along the way, what happens at each of those stops, and how to successfully navigate through the obstacles that you may encounter and keep advancing while enjoying the journey. You'll find the statistical support for the following claims in chapters two and three.

For now, consider the following: Most Americans consider themselves to be Christian. A majority of Americans, however, never make a confession and profession of faith in which they invite Jesus Christ to save them from the penalty of their sins against God. They are not, in other words, "born-again Christians." Even among the born-again

population, only a tiny proportion get beyond their profession of faith to experience the more robust and significant outcomes that are made available by Christ to His followers. A major reason why few of us experience the richness of the Christian life is because we do not know what to do beyond reading and memorizing more Bible verses, attending church services more consistently, donating larger sums of money to worthy causes, volunteering a few hours at church, and discussing our faith in Jesus with family and friends.

A majority of believers who figure out where the journey goes, and what it takes to maximize the opportunity God grants us by completing the journey to wholeness, instead choose to settle for a less complete and fulfilling life. If you are like me and tens of millions of other church-going Christians in the United States, it is difficult to be honest about the real nature of your current relationship with God and where it is headed. In all likelihood, an objective assessment would label that relationship “active but stalled.” It need not stay on its current plateau, but we are not making much progress in moving ahead to exploit the richer possibilities that are available to us.

MAPPING THE JOURNEY

Chapter 2

Everyone loves an extended vacation. Suppose you earned a two-week getaway after months of hard work. On the day you are scheduled to begin that time off, would you wake up that morning and ask yourself what you should do for the next two weeks? Of course not! You would have spent many hours over the previous months thinking about what you would most want to do, how to save up the money to do it, exploring your options, and developing a day-by-day plan for those two weeks. On that first morning, then, knowing that you need to travel to your vacation destination, would you simply put your suitcase in your car and start driving, hoping that you will eventually find that destination if you drive earnestly and safely?

Certainly not! You'd get directions and plan the drive accordingly. Maybe you'd print out directions from MapQuest or Google Maps, or perhaps rely upon a GPS system to guide you. If you're old school, you might get a map out of the glove compartment and carefully chart your route. Perhaps you'd even rely upon a driving plan and flip map you picked up at the automobile association. Whatever your preference, only a fool would simply turn on the car and randomly drive in the hope of reaching the desired destination. That's how we treat our vacations — as if they are sacred escapes into personal renewal.

But what about our spiritual renewal and development? Do we invest the same level of energy in meticulous planning and execution? Are we as careful about how we allocate our precious resources? Unfortunately, after surveying the spiritual journey of several thousand people, it seems that we are pretty random about our efforts to experience genuine God-driven transformation. Think of it as a mindless mutiny: we refuse to give God control of our lives, but we're not really guiding the ship toward a particular destination that reflects our ultimate best interests; we just keep meandering in the ocean of life hoping to find an appealing place to dock.

Forgive the impertinence, but sometimes it seems as if the Church — the aggregate collection of Christ believers — is indeed a ship of fools. We are not so much Christ followers as we are Christ admirers who listen to stories about His life and His teachings, then go about our business with a smile and a lobotomy.

What we need, then, is a map to help us figure out where we're going with our lives. Vacations are not the only life adventure we study and plan for; we strategically plot all kinds of things in our lives — the things that really matter to us, the aspects of life where we have little margin for error or desperately want to get it right.

For example, we plan our children's higher education, studying numerous college brochures, making visits to the campus, speaking to past and current students and staff before sending our child — and that check for tuition, room, and board — into a multi-year commitment with long-term implications. We plan our housing trajectory, typically getting married and living with parents or in an apartment before saving up enough

money and getting sufficiently established in an area to buy a “starter house” and eventually upgrading to a larger, more comfortable home. Many families even map out their family meals, a practice that allows them to save time and money by purchasing food for multiple meals at a time when they go grocery shopping. Planning helps our life become more pleasant and productive. We may treat the journey to wholeness in the same manner.

Based on the research, we can now identify the stops on our lifelong adventure with God — not as a straitjacket that God must honor, or to preclude the mystery of how He works in our lives, but as a reasonable guide to help us stay focused and advancing. I will explain some of the exceptions and caveats later, but first let's identify each of the stops on our road to richness and develop a basic understanding of what each stop entails and how the entire journey unfolds.

THE TEN STOPS

Everyone's life starts out at the same stop on the journey. What happens after that is completely up to us. But the research indicates that the ultimate journey may take us from the beginning through a total of ten stops on our adventure toward maturity in Christ. Here is a tour of the ten stops on the journey to wholeness.

STOP 1: IGNORANCE OF THE CONCEPT OR EXISTENCE OF SIN

When we are born, we have no tangible knowledge of the spiritual war between God and Satan, much less the choices we must make in the midst of the battle. Millions of people grow up oblivious to the fact that God exists and that He has provided moral and spiritual standards for us to satisfy. Others have some type of belief in God but are unaware of the concept of sin and how it relates to their reality. The idea that they are sinners or commit sins does not register at any conscious level. Few Americans remain in this state of ignorance beyond their elementary school years.

Current population size: 1 percent of adults.

STOP 2: AWARE OF AND INDIFFERENT TO SIN

As life goes on, most people gain exposure to the idea of sin. That doesn't mean they believe it is real. (After all, to accept the idea of sin, there must be a standard that defines sinful behavior or a holy being against which our behavior can be compared.) This stop is populated by people who are intellectually aware of the meaning or concept but do not accept it as valid or significant. They may even understand the concept well enough to identify some of their own thoughts, words, and actions as meeting a particular definition of sin, but they remain oblivious because they reject the legitimacy of sin as a standard. They are not concerned about sinning; they are simply attuned to the fact that certain behaviors may be categorized as sinful. They may be aware that certain people believe sin is bad and has negative personal and cultural implications, but they remain disconnected from any meaningful concern about it.

Current population size: 16 percent of adults.

STOP 3: CONCERNED ABOUT THE IMPLICATIONS OF PERSONAL SIN

Moving beyond mere awareness of the concept of sin, people that reach Stop 3 begin to feel uneasy about the "what if" possibilities — as in "what if sin does offend God and it impacts my quality of life?" Or "what if my Christian friends are right — there is a God, sin ticks Him off, and I could spend the rest of eternity in Hell because of it?" Motivated by such fears and concerns, these people begin to explore the implications of the various responses they could implement regarding sin. They could ignore it (i.e., it's unavoidable, or it's so common as to be meaningless, or it doesn't matter as long as you get away with it, or there is no ultimate penalty); continue to study the matter and try to understand the implications more fully; reduce their commission of sin so it is not as significant an issue; do a better job of hiding their sins from public view; or seek some way to wipe out their sins. The data indicate that most of the people at Stop 3 have some regular connection to a Christian church.

Current population size: 39 percent of adults.

STOP 4: CONFESS SINS AND ASK JESUS CHRIST TO BE THEIR SAVIOR

Fully apprised of the spiritual implications of sinning against God, and after a consideration of the options they may choose from, some people decide it is best to ask God for forgiveness and for Jesus Christ to save them from the eternal consequences of their sins. This most frequently happens in the presence of other believers, during which time the person seeking God's grace repeats some type of prayer or statement to invite Jesus into their life and save them from the condemnation that results from the failure to repent.

Subsequent to the profession of faith, people's next stop on the journey depends on what precipitated their immersion into the salvation experience at Stop 4. Because the journey is not always a progressive, linear adventure, some people will treat this as the pinnacle of their spiritual life and plateau here, continuing with the same level of religious activity and spiritual depth as they had prior to their salvation experience. Some will figure it's a "one and done" moment: "I said the prayer, I got the gift; now, where was I before this unexpected life interruption occurred?" Others will see Stop 4 as a point of departure into a different kind of spiritual experience and seek to go deeper with Christ. (We'll look at common paths taken after these descriptions.)

Current population size: 9 percent of adults.

STOP 5: COMMITMENT TO FAITH ACTIVITIES

The most common reaction after embracing Christ is to become more active in both personal spiritual growth and in a community of faith. The former enables the "new believer" to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the biblical narrative and its implications, often through educational forums such as Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and other Christian education courses.

In addition, there is an expectation of personal investment in private growth efforts, such as "quiet times," Bible reading, scripture memorization, and embracing opportunities for service. The latter reaction — participating in a community of believers — satisfies the need for belonging, which helps reform the new believer's self-image as a "new creation in Christ" and recognize his/her standing as part of a new, spiritual

family. This often occurs through small groups that meet mid-week in people's homes to worship, study and pray together.

Current population size: 24 percent of adults.

STOP 6: EXPERIENCE A PROLONGED PERIOD OF SPIRITUAL DISCONTENT

After years of involvement in the Christian faith, most people slip into a spiritual coma. Their faith becomes a series of rituals, routines, recitations, rules, relationships, and responsibilities. Without noticing it, their spiritual goals also slip into a more relaxed state such that they are no longer stretching their faith muscles and pushing themselves to explore and master new spiritual territory. Rather than sustaining their passion for getting closer to God, they become comfortable with their spiritual experience. But some people realize that there is a silent, unobtrusive kind of nagging that is troubling them regarding their faith.

Those who explore the genesis of this inner turmoil sometimes conclude that it is because they have become spiritually numb, engaging in a religious life on auto pilot, and are missing the full relationship and life adventure with Christ that is available to them. This season of "holy discontent" — most likely instigated by God to jar them into re-evaluating what they want from Him and from life — is a major decision point for the believers who get this far along the journey. It is at this point in their pilgrimage that they must make some momentous choices.

They are often bored with local church activities: what should they do about their involvement at a local church? They have discovered biblical reasons to question the validity of the local church system: should they continue to support it or seek an alternative? They are painfully aware that their personal spiritual growth has plateaued: what must they do to reinvigorate their spiritual life? The teaching and challenges they have received for the past few years have been lightweight and repetitive: is there greater depth to the Christian life, and how can they pursue it? They have become tired of the pettiness, the politics and the meaninglessness of the relationships in their primary faith community: is the organized church a help or

hindrance to a genuine Christian life, and how does one find or initiate a more appropriate community?

The disorganized missions trips and community service projects they experience cannot be the best option for using their gifts in service to others: how would Jesus have them invest their life in meaningful transformational activity? This is a time when serious believers ask the right questions out of spiritual hunger, but are also susceptible to cynicism, doubt and frustration. Asking the right questions and getting the right answers are two different things. Most believers who get to Stop 6 abandon the investigation once they realize the commitment and cost of moving forward on the journey to wholeness. Instead, they retreat to an earlier stop on the path and simply settle for what the local church and other spiritual entities have to offer.

In the process they retain their good intentions but typically become either invisible or institutional “pillars.” In other words, rather than pay the price of a deeper relationship with God, they retreat to the shelter of the religious games that ensnare most churched people. A small proportion decides to grit it out, rejecting the “normal” Christian experience based on the trust that God has something more fulfilling in store for them if they will commit to completing the arduous journey.

They cautiously decide to pursue a more challenging, all-encompassing, holistic faith experience. They are not sure what they are signing on for, but they figure it must be better than what they are presently enduring. The emphasis during this phase reflects the initial stages of integration — the blending and balancing of heart, mind, action and spirit.

Current population size: 6 percent of adults.

STOP 7: EXPERIENCING PERSONAL BROKENNESS

As believers dive into this new commitment, God meets them head-on with the realization that they are still too self-reliant and have never fully come to grips with the implications of their sin. Confession is one thing; feeling and dealing with the weight of what the confessed sins have done to their relationship with a holy and loving God is another.

Some people have experienced a degree of brokenness, addressing their sin but not their independence, so God endeavors to show them the ravages of self-reliance. So God takes them through a time of in-your-face confrontation. Serious believers finally reach a state of brokenness, which prepares them for the glorious healing and reconstruction that God has in mind for them.

This takes them beyond merely accepting the offer of salvation to the experience of authentic, shared love and a truly purposeful life. But this brokenness only comes after much reflection and meditation, sorrow and remorse, realistic self-evaluation, talking and listening to God, and coming to the end of self as the “go to” person in all situations. This phase is largely about realigning our spirit with God's.

Current population size: 3 percent of adults.

STOP 8: CHOOSING TO SURRENDER AND SUBMIT FULLY TO GOD: RADICAL DEPENDENCE

God never wants us to remain shattered; His ultimate desire is for us to become one with Him and mature into the human beings He envisioned. But getting there is a difficult journey in and of itself. The realization and understanding of our dilemma, which gets activated at Stop 7, merely sets us up for the major transition we go through at Stop 8.

It is at this juncture that we understand what total surrender, complete submission, and utter dependence upon God really mean. These are no longer concepts preached about or written about in a vague, arms-length manner; they now become the core of our existence. To develop the maturity and the connection desired, we allow God to remake our life. Our normal pace slows down: mere activity is no longer as satisfying or

meaningful because we have adopted a different goal. Silence, stillness, and solitude are built into our schedule to protect us from the distractions that have distorted our life and perspectives for so long. We begin every day consciously renewing our commitment to God, to trusting and following Him throughout the day.

That produces an ever-present God-consciousness that changes our emotions, thoughts and deeds. We not only agree to give up control, but we actually do so; we do not act or speak until we sense direction from Him. We commit to seeing the world through God's eyes — and responding as we believe He would. We humble ourselves before God, but also gratefully accept spiritual guidance from other mature believers who are on the same journey. The alterations that occur at this stop on the journey are holistic and radical.

Current population size: 1 percent of adults.

STOP 9: ENJOYING A PROFOUND INTIMACY WITH AND LOVE FOR GOD

At some mystical point, God blesses us with the ability to know and love Him so profoundly that it is difficult to put into words. Reaching this point transforms everything. The believer experiences levels of joy, peace and wisdom previously unknown. Involvement in a faith community takes on a new meaning and investment in that community looks very different. Life assumes a new depth of purpose.

Self-examination occurs with a different lens. Life is appreciated as a gift in strikingly divergent ways. Waking up every morning is suddenly more satisfying and exhilarating. Being a new creation in Christ has meaning that never could have previously understood or appreciated.

Current population size: 0.5 percent of adults.

STOP 10: EXPERIENCING A PROFOUND COMPASSION AND LOVE FOR HUMANITY

With their profound love of God in place, believers become able to see people the way God does and to love them as He loves them. The transformed believer engages with the world from a very different perspective and shares the joys and heartaches felt by God. Being the blessing to others that God made them to be consumes their hours. This is the ultimate life.

Current population size: 0.5 percent of adults.

Table 1 Distribution of Adults along the Transformational Journey

| | |
|----------------------------------|------|
| Stop 1: Unaware of sin | 1% |
| Stop 2: Indifferent to sin | 16% |
| Stop 3: Worried about sin | 39% |
| Stop 4: Forgiven for sin | 9% |
| Stop 5: Forgiven and active | 24% |
| Stop 6: Holy discontent | 6% |
| Stop 7: Broken by God | 3% |
| Stop 8: Surrender and submission | 1% |
| Stop 9: Profound love of God | 0.5% |
| Stop 10: Profound love of people | 0.5% |