



Reclaiming the Christ/Messiah for Spiritual Formation

A presentation at the All Saints Chapter meeting of the Order of Saint Luke.

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By Br. Terry Van Hook, prior

The elementary school nerd in me loved watching a little-known TV show called “Why is it so?” It was like the famous “Watch Mr. Wizard” show, which I also watched regularly, but on a college level. I loved both shows, but Dr. Julius Sumner Miller and his “Why is it so?” was my favorite.

Dr. Miller, a Physics professor, was enthusiastic, full of energy and spirit! And he broadcast from an actual physics teaching lab at El Camino College in Torrance, CA!!

Watching him was like watching Einstein on roller skates. Hair flying, often turning to the chalkboard behind him to add drawings, chemical symbols and equations. It was “raw” physics and chemistry on a deep level. No talking down to his audience or students.

Unsurprisingly, “Why is it so?” has become my ongoing motto as I disassembled broken toasters, turned my flexy flyer-wheeled sled into a land sailboat, and tackled theology.

*Jesus said: “...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,
in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

In seminary, I brought that same passion to theology, particularly the “why” of the early Christian movement. I was taken by the early Christians’ “enthusiasm” (from the Greek *enthousiasmos*, to ‘be inspired or possessed by God’). The power and spirit in their lives swept through Judea and Samaria and the whole Roman world.

I wondered just where that energy came from. How did it bring hope to a world dominated by a brutal Roman regime? What was the nature of that spiritual transformation? Even when it went through “dry” periods and lost its original “holiness” and closeness to God, how did it regain its spiritual heart and soul? I know many of you have thought deeply on these things as well.

It’s with this same enthusiastic, unconditional love of the Christ in the Holy Spirit that I respectfully share my thoughts about...

“Reclaiming the Christ/Messiah for Spiritual Formation.”

Part I.

A tsunami of multiplying changes has swept over us in the last 50-60 years.

When and How are we going to effectively respond?

We are all aware that we are being swept up in a time of significant, worldwide change. This tsunami brings transformation, confusion, fear, and much anxiety. The social, technological, economic, and environmental aspects of this crisis are well documented.

One significant outcome of this is the rise of widespread isolation and separation from one another. The recent Surgeon General Vivek Murthy called it an “Epidemic of Loneliness.”

I've seen a pervasive and systemic lack of trust. Our social fabric has been torn apart. Many people seem to be grappling with profound struggles regarding their identity and the meaning of life (i.e. "Who am I?", "Why am I here?"). Personal relationships and our "Supportive Community" relationships are crumbling everywhere—in the workplace, families, religious institutions, and civic organizations.

Our churches have experienced a historic decline in participation and are struggling for survival. The COVID-19 pandemic and ecclesiastical disagreements have only worsened this situation. Yet, even amid all this "bad news," the "Good News of the Gospel" is becoming evident through signs of a renewed interest in spiritual living. Some areas are actively seeking new young adult converts.

A widespread search for meaning is turning hearts toward the church. (See the appendix for a short demographic reflection on this.)

God's hope speaks to us that in the midst of death, there is life.

Our challenge is to open our hearts again to that eternal renewal, find ways to live by it, and authentically communicate it to those around us.

Realizing that many around us have turned away from "traditional talk" about faith and religion, yet also consider themselves spiritual, I've searched for ways to understand why this is so? I seek to begin the faith and meaning conversation with them anew.

In that search, I discovered doors opening by asking: "What are your thoughts about Heaven?" A non-threatening conversation begins. Follow-up comments can include: "I've been thinking a lot about heaven recently," or "I've had several people die recently, and with the turmoil all around me, I'm wondering, "What does it all mean?" It's easy to ask: "What about you?" A recent Pew poll indicated that 73% of all U.S.A. residents believe in Heaven, and of young adults, it's 63%¹, so everyone can talk about it.

In addition, I've noticed many references to Heaven in media, in jokes, and, of course, at funerals and other times of loss.

Even for those who report "none" as their faith, there always seem to be some thoughts about Heaven. Once a conversation about Heaven begins, the meaning of life is not far behind.

Part II.

Rethinking the How and Why of the Church

One of the cornerstones of church life today is a concern for Discipleship. For many, it's the main reason for the church's existence. Discipleship involves engaging our motives and understanding God's values and our actions. It showcases the best thoughts, reflections, and insights of God, Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Discipleship opens the doors to the historical practices, worship, music, ministries, and social concerns that shape a life of faith.

¹ "Views on the afterlife: Majorities of U.S. adults say they believe in heaven, hell, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/>, Nov. 23, 2021

In addition, spiritual formation occurs in the “community ecosystem,” a church network of faithful and God-loving people. There, we find questioning as well as accountability, reflection as well as challenge, stretching, and spiritual growth. Such a loving and supportive community surrounds us with healing and comfort, support, and encouragement as we become God’s best hope for us.

TACTICS – STRATEGY – THEOLOGY

One way to understand the dynamics of church life is to identify the relationship among Tactics (ministries and programs), Strategy (developing a consistent vision, mission, and core values for overall guidance), and Theology (the “why” we do all that we do). For some, this can be visualized as a tree: Theology providing the “root stock,” Strategy giving focus and resources where needed, and Tactics flowering and reaching out in many directions to grow, transform, and serve others.

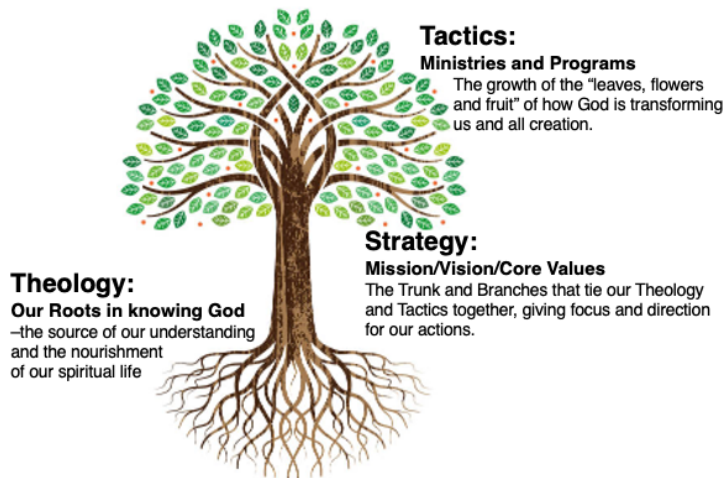


Fig. 1 The Tactics/Strategy/Theology connection that comprises the church.

However, we’ve learned over the years that the most visible “Tactics” change, sometimes rapidly. Community demographics shift, leaders and participants age, passion and interest lag, so some (and perhaps most!) of the leaves and branches wither and die.

Dead programs become difficult to revive or receive inadequate support. Significant pruning and nourishment are needed.

Likewise, “Strategies” change with new ideas, new leadership, new technology, and even envy regarding what is working in other churches. The Mission/Vision/Core Values may be quickly forgotten. The church is no longer described in exciting ways. Its purpose is dim and rarely recognized or described.

“Theology” is the most stable (hopefully!) of the three but does change from time to time with the inclusion of different voices and scholarship. Yet, its stability often relegates it to assumptions rather than the roots resourcing us from the rich soil of our understanding of God.

It is helpful for me to visualize this change in emphasis regarding these parts of the church as illustrated in Fig. 2: “21st Century TST Current focus”.



Fig. 2: 21st Century Current TST focus

In the recent past (75 to 100 years or so) the area of **TACTICS** has drawn the most time and effort simply because it’s very concrete and directly engages the church’s day-to-day operation. It is easiest to build enthusiasm for and secure the resources to support it because it is right in front of us and familiar. We can easily measure its effects.

In contrast, developing a **STRATEGY** requires dedicated time and energy for study and reflection. While this can be beneficial, the results may suffer from the “Frame it and Forget it” syndrome. A statement once vital fades into familiarity. It needs constant maintenance and focus.

Sound **THEOLOGY** formed through systematic study, questioning, and shared viewpoints is often overlooked once leaders leave a seminary/learning environment. For our laity, it often becomes a “set it and forget it” framework that is stuck in our theological thoughts of the past. Although it can change when clergy leadership changes, I pointed out earlier that most adult Christian education is expected to take place in the sermon (20 minutes!).

With worship attendance patterns changing so rapidly, even that brief window for learning is often available only once or twice a month. This makes the deepening of Christian discipleship rare. As we look at the church of the 21st century (especially in the United Methodist church of which I am most familiar,) there is a consensus that the Church is great at **“doing things”** (tactics) and not so great at knowing exactly **“WHY”** we do things (Strategy, and especially Theology.)

A Critical Conclusion

Considering current church trends, such a pattern is unsustainable. We need to clarify the deeper, most significant nature of our faith and why NOW is a crucial time for all of us to be more aware of what our transformative God is doing.

I deeply trust and hope that the Order of Saint Luke can become a place of spiritual renewal and accountability through its emphasis on sacramental living, serving the Church and the world, and encouraging the transformation of all creation.

To achieve this, we must be open, honest, wise, and faithful.

In our time of great information and “instant gratification” overload, the danger is to rush our understanding and conclusions to achieve the results we desire. Consequently, we often overlook the deeper wisdom needed to sustain a Sacramentally Centered life filled with worship, service, and humility.

“General Burnout” is an all-too-common experience. For our spiritual lives to heal from that burnout, they need to be balanced, with our theological roots healthy and nourished. Starting with revitalizing our motivational “WHY,” which leads to a more enthusiastic and Holy Spirit-filled tactical “HOW.”

The OSL can provide a path for our lives and the church's life to help realign our faith with and engage the emerging needs of the 21st century.

A clear, informed, and progressive theology can guide all our strategies and tactics. Our decisions and actions will become wiser, more transparent, and profoundly transformative. Spiritual growth begins anew as we identify and align our will with our gracious God, who loves and forgives unconditionally.

Fig. 2: “21st Century TST Refocus” illustrates this as it “flips the script” and leads us into an intentional and focused exploration of our theology. It helps us concentrate on doing a few things exceptionally as it allows the Holy Spirit to inspire us again.

As we sift through our roots and understandings, we must gently confront society's surface thoughts and often confusing theologies. We are challenged to engage in good scholarship and reflection while also showing compassion and empathy. Remember, we’re dealing with beliefs and habits that a person may have held for a lifetime. Updating them will be a challenge.



Fig. 2: 21st Century TST Refocus

However, if presented from the perspective of growth in discipleship and deepening one’s spiritual life, such a path can become a dynamic way to introduce deeper Spiritual Disciplines, bringing people together around a biblically sound vision for the church, adapted for our current situation.

New energy and excitement can be unleashed, much like that which empowered the 1st-century Christians. Rediscovering our “Holy Motive” is appealing once again. From this, all the ministries and programs of the church can emerge, renewed in the broader holy perspective of God and acknowledging the unmerited gift of participation in God’s holy will.

Part III.

A Brief Theological Reflection on Three Critical Topics for the 21st Century

To embark on a shared spiritual journey with those around us, many of whom resist Christianity, I’ve identified three core faith understandings that I believe can refocus and open new avenues of communication that may help the church regain its initiative in a compassionate and caring way manner.

By addressing these three, I’ve concluded that we can identify where the church, and specifically our Order, can provide unique leadership in exploring the divisiveness, anger, and hatred surrounding us and, additionally, help us examine life’s meaning, questions of identity, and the brokenness within and around us.

1. Christology: **Jesus Christ**

“Who do you say I am” (Matt. 16:13-16, Mark 8:27-29, Luke 9:18-20)

For most of my life, the name: “Jesus Christ” has been spoken of as holy and sacred. It simply was the “name” we used to refer to the second person of the Trinity, without much deep thought about its meaning. I learned it as part of the liturgy. I heard it in both profane and sacred speech. It is a name like other names, except this one is exceptionally holy.

It wasn’t until seminary that I learned that “Christ,” a Greek word, translates to “Messiah” in Hebrew. It’s a title, not a name. It means “Anointed One,” Deliverer, Savior, and Leader (i.e., King, Prophet) who will bring peace and restoration to the people of Israel and Judah.

To simplify (and it can get very complex), we hear Jesus called “Savior,” meaning, for many Christians, a personal savior who forgives our sins and makes us acceptable to God. We also learn of Jesus, the good teacher, who beckons us with a new lifestyle filled with love and an expectation that we are to embrace it.

However, the Messiah represented much more than just a personal savior, a good shepherd, and a wise teacher in the first century.

During the time of Jesus, the Jews desperately hoped for a NEW Messiah modeled after other physical “Saviors” from the past. This Messiah was expected to lift the bloody boot of the Roman army from their land and restore the legendary throne of David.

When Jesus did not physically overthrow Rome by force, he was mocked and killed by the Romans at the instigation of the Jewish leaders. He died in disgrace with the title: “King of the Jews” (a failed Messiah) nailed above his head.

Throughout his teachings, Jesus spoke extensively about the “kingdom” (i.e., realm, commonwealth) of God and its arrival in the world. His parables illustrated this realm and how one should conduct themselves within it. It represented a great hope, but the complete understanding of it did not emerge until his Resurrection. (We’ll return to a little deeper understanding of the “kingdom” in the next section.)

In the Resurrection and the appearances that followed, the disciples and other early “followers of the way” began to live in the realization that God’s Kingdom/Realm HAD come and was breaking into the world all around them.

Their faith life changed from one of “*living up to the Law*” and thereby becoming acceptable to God. In its place was the faithful embrace of the realized “*gift of Heaven (God’s Kingdom)*.” this gift is contingent only on the unconditional grace of God. And as Jesus said, it was available to ALL, regardless of who they were or their past actions.

The Resurrection of Jesus expanded their understanding of God from Creator, Father, and Law-giver to include Jesus the Messiah: Redeemer, Forgiver, God with us, and Prince of Peace. Additionally, God gave them the Holy Spirit: the paraclete, the giver of power, a comforter, healer, sustainer, and ongoing instructor about God’s constant, unconditional, embracing love for all.

Because they saw the Realm of God being realized in their lives, many Early Christians (and their families) were able to face life-threatening persecution. They choose NOT to give up the gift of God’s presence and the heavenly reality in Jesus the Messiah (Christ).

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah (Christ) profoundly refocused their earthly lives in a spiritual way. No longer were they bound by the expectations of the physical world, the power of brutal rulers, or a hypocritical society around them. A new movement of faith had arrived.

That same refocusing is essential today. Our world confronts oppressive greed and dehumanizing loneliness. Divisions and strife are tearing us apart. There is a profound quest for identity and meaning, community, hope, and healing.

We need to reclaim the title: “The Messiah” from narrow definitions and usages and use it to express its full depth of understanding, holy insight, and the power of God’s “kingdom come,” as well as what living in God’s will truly entails.

The church, the body of Christ, is called to lead spiritually, morally, and ethically once again and provide light in the darkness surrounding us. As people of God’s “way,” the church can help rekindle that early faithful (“*en-theos-iasmos*” – “in God”) for a new age.

Peter answers, “**You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,**”

(Matt. 16:16, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20)

2. Eschatology and the Apostolic Hope: **"Where is Heaven? Where is the Kingdom of God?"**

The Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first human to orbit the Earth, is said to have remarked, "I've been up there and didn't see" heaven,"

"Where is Heaven?" A question commonly asked in Sunday School that is usually answered quickly: "all around us!" Yet the idea persists in society that heaven exists only in the "after-life." That when people die, they will be in "a better place." And that God and Heaven are somewhere "up there."

Even the most jaded observer of the religious scene typically holds some opinion about Heaven. This may manifest as the belief that "There is no heaven," or it could be an elaborate description of an idyllic scene filled with loved ones. There may be judgment, healing, and grace. It could be connected to a recent funeral or a reflection on their own experience mortality.

Even youth, young adults, and other adults who are disenchanted with church and religion appear open to discussing their perspectives on heaven and hell if the inquiry is genuine and heartfelt.

Western civilization, shaped by Christian thought, has often defined heaven as a future place filled with various "good things," ranging from an abundance of food to an idyllic outdoors adorned with clouds and/or golf courses. Furthermore, our Bible frequently reinforces the idea that heaven is "up there" or in a location separate from "here."
(Luke 24:50-51 et.al.)

The "Ladder of Divine Ascent," illustrated here, is often interpreted as depicting a path TO Christ and his divine love, rather than a journey WITH the Christ and his divine love.

However, most Bible scholars indicate that a careful reading of Holy Scriptures does not support a "transactional" vision of heaven. Moreover, as Christians, we have a unique understanding of "Heaven."

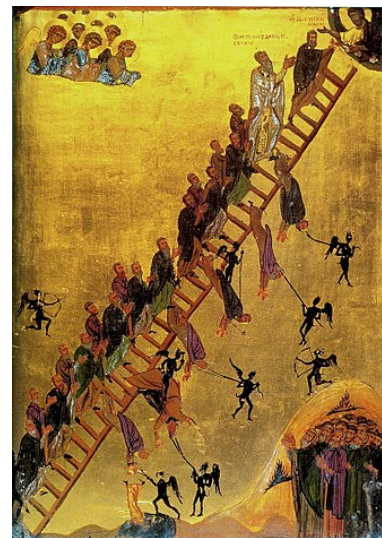
It all starts with the "Gospel of Jesus the Christ."

As I travel around to various churches, I often ask the question, "What is the Gospel?" I receive many responses and most reply with some variation of love (i.e., God's love, the love of Jesus Christ, or the love of the Holy Spirit). A few mention "The Bible" or the "Gospel stories of the Bible." Even fewer refer to John 3:16: "For God so loved the world..."

I've yet to encounter someone who spontaneously says Mark 1:14-15! (Or its counterparts in Matt. 4:17, Luke 4:16-21, or John 1:1-18.)

There, we read Jesus' words about the Gospel (the Good news)...¹⁴...*Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news (i.e., **Gospel**) of God*

¹⁵ and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.(i.e., **Gospel**)" (Mk 1:14-15)



our

This announcement represents God's grace made real and visible to all creation. It forms the foundation of the "Apostolic Hope" that Dr. Dwight Vogel writes about in "Food for Pilgrims."":

"By that grace we become new creatures, born anew through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The transforming power of God's grace comes to us through the presence of the risen Christ, and that is what Christian worship is all about."²

Jesus the Christ/Messiah, we learn, is not so much somewhere else as he is **"always with us."** (Matt 18:20, et.al.) In other words, heaven has come to us, and we, along with all things, are in the process of transforming into God's will for us and creation.

And so we are taught pray:

**"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
10 your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven."** (Matt 6:9-10)

Yet it seems that we continue to hold these two thoughts: "Heaven is 'out there' somewhere," and "Jesus is close to me!" always in a state of unresolved vagueness. This vagueness about Heaven and the presence of God is particularly evident in our mainline church life. I've seen us prioritize "doing" God's work of justice and compassion, diligently engaging in ministry and service.

In a Barna survey of U.S. adults conducted 5 years ago, approximately half (48%) of the respondents indicated that one's actions and good works determine whether one attains eternal life or not.³ And more startling, of those who describe themselves as Christians, 52% affirm that a "works-oriented" life leads to God's acceptance⁴ (The church categories are: Pentecostal (46%), mainline Protestant (44%), and evangelical (41%), Catholics (70%))⁵

In addition, in 2022, Barna elsewhere reports that "80 percent of churches have a children's ministry, and 81 percent have a youth ministry, according to congregants. Other programs for groups like married adults, college students, or seniors, though still available in many churches, are far less common than ministry for kids and youth."⁶

This points to the fact that most churches strongly emphasize educating children and youth about sound Christian values and morals, but the "lifelong learning" needed for adult spiritual discipleship ("going on to perfection") is limited to sermon time with little or no feedback.

For many, their theological growth effectively stopped after Confirmation and Middle School

² Dwight Vogel *Food for Pilgrims: A Journey with St. Luke* © The Order of Saint Luke. (OSL Publications, Ashland City TN) pg. 9

³ "AWVI 2020 Survey: 1 in 3 US Adults Embrace Salvation Through Jesus; More Believe It Can Be 'Earned'", <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2020/08/04/1-in-3-us-adults-embrace-salvation-through-jesus-more-believe-it-can-be-earned/>, August 4, 2020

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "Children's Ministry Is Crucial, But Its Impact Is Hard to Measure" <https://www.barna.com/research/childrens-ministry/>, May 25, 2022

Even when preached regularly (and church members are rarely “every Sunday” Christians), our beliefs about heaven as a gift of unmerited love are lost amid the church's “busyness” and our persistent self-doubts and anxieties around “self-worthiness.”

In contrast to all those “distractions” swirling around us, the words of GREETING from “A Lukan Liturgy of Word and Table” in the Book of Offices and Services are delightful and revitalizing.

“Blessed be God, who shepherds us and sets us free!

May the dawn from on high break upon us to guide us into the way of peace.

With God's tender compassion,

Christ walks with us, opening the scriptures,

and making himself known to us in the breaking of bread.”⁷

For me, the spiritual excitement and faith of 1st-century Christians centered on the fullness of heaven to come, as well as the reality of God's presence during the “in-between” time— the period between Jesus's life, death, and resurrection and the full realization of the Kingdom (realm, commonwealth of God). Some have called this the “Already, Not Yet” understanding of “Consistent Eschatology.”

Those early Christians realized that they were already living with God in “heaven” in some way, even as they looked forward to the ultimate heaven to come. And they did not want to give that up for anything.

I like to call this in-between time the “Porch of Heaven.” It is an existence in which we experience a significant part of God's unconditional love, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's a present reality, even as we look beyond to the fullness of God in a “new heaven and new earth.” (Rev. 21:1).

It is a “foretaste” of eternal life and embraces us in the wonder of God's love (grace) even now. It's a transcendent gift of God's gracious, unconditional, and forgiving nature, offered with no strings attached. Everyone receives this gift whether they recognize it or not.⁸

Rev. John Wesley writes about the kingdom of God residing “within us, even ‘righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.’”⁹ This inward kingdom is the Lord reigning in the human heart. It is “heaven already opened in the soul, the first springing up of those rivers of pleasure which flow at God's right hand forevermore.”¹⁰

From the Morning Prayer Liturgy of the OSL Book of Offices and Services:

“By Word and water God renews us this day

in the living fountain of God's grace

and raises us with Christ Jesus to live a new life in the spirit.”¹¹

⁷ “The Book of Offices and Services of the Order of Saint Luke” (Fourth Edition) @ 2023, Pg. 4

⁸ “Our Theology of Grace”, Baltimore-Wash. Conf., the UMC, <https://bit.ly/4mmZZEP> accessed May 19, 2025

⁹ John Wesley, “Sermon on the Mount, I,” *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*, (34 vols., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:481.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The Book of Offices and Services of the Order of Saint Luke (Fourth Edition) @ 2023, Pg. 27-28

3. Discipleship and Sacramental Living/Sacramental Spirituality: **“Citizens of Heaven”**

“...Indeed (God) is not far from each one of us.”²⁸

For ‘In (God) we live and move and have our being’...” (Acts 17:27c-28a)

For me, Sacramental Living/ Sacramental Spirituality is a daily commitment to reside on the “Porch of Heaven.” It emphasizes the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism, Bible Study, and other spiritual disciplines within the Christian community..”

As Dr. Vogel puts it, sacramental spirituality “...takes place at the intersection of spirituality, liturgy, theologizing and praxis (i.e., making the living of our faith). Sacramental living defies compartmentalization; it is dynamic and holistic.”¹² It infuses every moment and action of our lives.

With our commitment to the Gospel, we step onto this Porch of Heaven and begin our life with God, revealed by Jesus the Christ/Messiah and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This is our discipleship: to trust in God and live according to God’s will. While we are initially welcomed and accepted “just as I am,” as the old hymn states, God also hopes, expects, guides, and encourages us to grow in the unconditional love of Jesus Christ/the Messiah in understanding, compassion, forgiveness, worship, and wisdom. In other words, we fully live out our “Sacramental life” in our hearts, minds, souls, strength, and actions.

“John Wesley called this lifelong process **sanctification** [emphasis added] or becoming ‘*perfected in love*.’ Sanctifying grace draws us toward Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart ‘*habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor*’ and as ‘*having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked*.’”¹³

In living on this heavenly porch, God adopts us “as God’s very own children” (Gal 4:5), so much so that we become “Citizens of Heaven”[emphasis added] (Phil 3:20). Paul refers to all those in the church as “saints”: those who are being made holy, set-apart, sanctified, gifted, and united in Christ/the Messiah (see NRSV Romans 1:7, I Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1, Eph. 1:1, Phil. 1:1, Col. 1:, etc.). Please note that the term “saints” is not confined to the Christian Testament but is also found throughout Psalms.

VI. Implications of Christ, the Messiah, on our Spiritual Formation

“Think often on God, by day, by night, in your business and even in your diversions. (God) is always near you and with you; leave him not alone.”

— Brother Lawrence¹⁴



After reflecting on the significant social changes and how to communicate in the 21st century. Here are some thoughts about the “holy habits” and actions. As we grow as disciples of the Christ, they can revive the vitality and enthusiasm (“en-theos-iasmos”) of the early Christians for the Good News of Jesus Christ in us.

¹² Dwight Vogel *Food for Pilgrims: A Journey with St. Luke* © The Order of Saint Luke. (OSL Publications, Ashland City TN) pg. 9

¹³ “What did John Wesley mean by ‘moving on to perfection?’,” www.umc.com, [United Methodist Church], ©2025, <https://bit.ly/Wesley-Perfection> Accessed May 12, 2025

¹⁴ Brother Lawrence, “*Practicing the Presence of God*,” Martino Fine Books, 2016

In navigating this time of great loneliness, mistrust, filled with the search for identity, and meaning of life, it's clear that these issues are solidly in the church's "wheelhouse" as core issues of faithful concern.

The ominous economic storm is rapidly gathering, soon to be overwhelmed by the tsunami of climate change. I am convinced that the church, the body of Christ, can provide a meaningful and powerful counterpoint of hope and spiritual direction rooted in God's unconditional love.

I firmly believe that the Order of Saint Luke is uniquely equipped for this exceptional time, with its historic emphasis on worship, devotion, study, sacramental living, and service in God's realm.

We are experiencing a period of great change, dislocation, pain, and tragedy. The gifts of the Christian tradition can empower this season to become a time of deep reflection, spiritual discipline, courage, and faith.

And to this time of great challenge, we can covenant to live with a heightened awareness of Jesus the Messiah (Christ) on this 'Porch of Heaven' as "Citizens in Heaven." We can covenant to embody God's hopeful "Eucharistic" presence in this world. And, in doing so, we can move with God into the brokenness, tragedy, loneliness, meaninglessness, and despair that our Greed-based/Consumer-driven society has created.

It's important that each person is unique, so there is not one way to go about living a Sacramental life. There are many ways we do this, and so what follows are just a few thoughts to help us visualize the path before us. Perhaps your creativity and thoughts can flourish as these options are explored.

A. WORSHIP/GRATITUDE:

- i. Instead of the common misconception of worship as a time for God to inspire us (especially after a tiring week), can we recapture a sense of deep gratitude and excited expectation of gathering that allows our worship to soar?

We can be watchful and alert all week long to all the ways Christ's Eucharistic presence is with us and bring all of those moments to share in worship.

In this manner, we deepen our core spiritual discipline of gratitude and thanks to God rather than the often present "me"-focus. ("Remember, It's not about you!")

- ii. There is no record of the early Christians celebrating an annual Day of Resurrection Day (Easter) until the late second century. For them, each Sunday was a "Little Easter," and each week, in worship, there was a celebration of the Resurrection of the Messiah/Christ.

Our annual Easter Celebration has great music and inspiring prayers and preaching, but now it's just like Christmas, a holiday (holy-day) quickly forgotten and put away as we prepare for other cultural events like New Year's Eve and St. Patrick's Day

Can our regular Sunday celebrations, our "Sunday Dinner with Jesus the Christ," be as joyous as our Annual Easter Sunday celebration?

- iii. Sacraments in worship can always be presented more faithfully and artistically, allowing them to take a more central role in our liturgical rhythms. Both Baptism and the Eucharist are "feasts" worth looking forward to.



- a. The Eucharist can move toward a weekly celebration, aligning with Wesley's desires. The act of authentically and intentionally presiding at the table has a long history in our Order, reflecting our commitment to a more measured and meaningful practice that takes great care not to be rushed or viewed as an "add-on" to the regular Sunday service. Additionally, having frequent opportunities to explain the depth and power of the Eucharist is always fitting. We can pay more attention to the details: type of bread, an additional gluten-free station, a revival of singing during the time of serving, and a corps of trained lay eucharistic ministers to all enhance the experience of being on some unique "holy ground together." Mid-week meetings, unique retreats, and fellowship gatherings can also incorporate the Eucharist. ("Dinner Church" is popular in the "Fresh Expressions" movement as well.) As it was for the early Christians, the centrality of the Eucharist is and can be again a deeply covenantal and binding element of our lives in the Christian faith.
 - b. Baptism can also play a central role. We don't need to wait for babies to be born, adult baptisms, confirmations, or specific times to join the local church to remember our Baptism. The last Sunday of the month can serve as a monthly opportunity to pause, lift up the creed, and briefly renew our baptismal vows. With the Eucharist service the following week, we are prepared to receive the body and blood of Christ once again.
 - c. The Sunday after January 6th that celebrates Jesus's baptism can become an annual "Congregational Renewal of Baptism." It's a way to add new significance to the secular New Year's Eve celebrations and God's presence and power to the often fleeting "New Year's Resolutions," making them now "Holy covenants with God." Engaging them in something empowered by the Holy Spirit can encourage us to make deeper and more substantial changes in our lives than we usually do at that time.
- iv. "Silence is God's first language." [St. John of the Cross and Fr. Thomas Keating]
- Are there spaces in our worship for silence before God? In our preparatory time before worship? After particularly moving and inspiring songs, readings, and sermons? Can we learn from our Quaker friends to spend more time in quiet reflection? Can we read scripture and pray together at a more measured and relaxed pace to allow the depth of the words to soak into our souls? Can the times before and after worship regain a quiet reverence for confession and reflection on the day's scripture instead of being primarily for greeting and "catching up" with those we haven't seen in a while?
- I know that such sharing is essential in a society that has "cocooned" itself off and is lonely and isolated. We've been conditioned to show generous appreciation for the virtuosity of singers and musicians, as well as the efforts of our children.
- Perhaps a "conversational zone" and/or an "appreciation zone" could be created for the "coffee sacrament" of hospitality and greeting, including clear guidance on how to utilize it.
- Regular Silent Retreats and days of prayer that include quiet, spiritual reflection and communal sharing of wisdom and insights gained can happen regularly in our local congregations. There are so many opportunities to help people pause and listen to God.
- v. SMALL GROUPS/ACCOUNTABILITY/PRAYER:
- a. For all intents and purposes, we have sadly lost John Wesley's "secret" of a systematic focus on small groups. Yet in this time of loneliness, an intense search for meaning, and

an often private struggle for identity, those spiritually grounded and community building small groups can be tremendously helpful in connecting us with God and each other.

- b. Holding each other accountable is a primary aim of our small groups. John Wesley's question, "*How goes it with your soul?*" needs to be regularly addressed in all of our groups (even task-oriented and fellowship groups), with time given for the necessary hearing, healing, responding, prayer, and encouragement by group members.
 - c. Small groups need simplified administration and role sharing to share the burden and prevent the burnout that happens when one person is responsible for everything.
 - d. Silence and Small Group devotions can set the tone and tenor of the time together and be an experiential model for the growth of each person's personal spiritual habits.
 - e. Such groups can be formed around shared passions and interests, even as they challenge us to grow disciples in faith and action.
 - f. Such a group can have a "mission" or "outreach" based on a shared concern or commitment. (For example, raising funds, gathering blankets and clothes, supporting a food bank, demonstrating peace and justice, remodeling a classroom, etc.)
- vi. PERSONAL SPIRITUAL DEVOTIONS/HOLY HABITS:
- a. One's spiritual disciplines are at the heart of living in the Eucharistic presence of Jesus the Messiah/the Christ. There are many disciplines to choose from, so it's important to showcase and teach various "holy habits." Our OSL tradition encourages daily morning and/or evening prayer and provides resources to facilitate this practice.
 - b. What other suggestions might we offer to each other? (Fasting, Lectio Divina, Spiritual friendship, Spiritual Direction?) How can we better learn what our members are doing, and how many "holy habits" develop around the small groups that Disciples are encouraged to join?
 - c. What "Rites of Passage" and other character-forming and identity-building moments can we create to invite Christ's presence more deeply into our lives?
 - d. The living of an often traumatic and hopefully joyous life offers many "folk remedies" to the pain and tragedy, joy and celebration that we do to mark our lives.
 - e. What do we do in the face of significant times and traumatic times in our lives?
 - f. In our grief, for example, are the considerations we share liturgically sound and theologically deepening? Are the rituals designed surrounding death reflective of our living as "citizens of Heaven?" Is our trust in an eternal God clear and visible?
 - g. Are these same questions asked for other times in our lives: Birth, Birthdays, Graduations, Scholastic accomplishments, work changes, promotions, Marriages, and covenantal relationships? Are they thought of during major purchases of cars, homes, and Colleges?
 - h. How do we celebrate moving away and relocating? How do we grieve those who move far from us?
 - i. How do we keep our spiritual connections strong in all these times?
- vii. TALENTS, GIFTS AND SPIRITUAL GIFTS/WORK, MONEY, TIME, AND PLAY:

- a. Frequent reminders of the gifts and graces of God include not only Unconditional Love, Confession, Forgiveness, Healing, and consequential actions, but also creative talents and abilities that inspire, help, and resolve the problems we encounter in life. This can range from simply being a sympathetic ear and shoulder to lean on, to fixing a leaking pipe or addressing car or computer issues.
- b. Often, considering the gifts and talents one has been given leads to “Spiritual gifts” as enumerated by St. Paul. These are the abilities we use to “edify” and build up the church, the body of Christ. Periodic references and study of these gifts help us all be aware of how God has blessed us to be the beloved community for each other and for those around us.
- c. Christ often referred to our money. The use of our money is a powerful and clear way of revealing our inner transformation and dedication to God’s will. Stewardship and other opportunities to be in mission and ministry can highlight that our financial support of such activities is not an obligation of the faith (as we often unconsciously do) but rather an outgrowth of our gratitude and faith (trust) in God.
- d. Likewise, how we spend our time, especially our “discretionary” time, marks our inward life in God. Are the entertainments we choose helpful to our spirit in the same way that the food we eat is helpful to our overall health? Is our work-family-personal time in a spiritually healthy balance? Does the recreation we engage in offer fun and relaxation and treat others in ways that reflect our unconditional love and concern for them?
- e. Examining every area of our lives with the “eyes of Christ” and realizing that we are truly “citizens of Heaven ” can infuse and transform them. Do our actions reflect that awareness and commitment? What can others learn from our living out God’s “holy habits?”

As you can see, this is only the beginning of a discussion on what it means to be a Disciple living a Eucharistic, Sacramental life.

I hope these insights offer an ancient yet contemporary way to navigate through it all, continually growing in the sanctification that John Wesley wrote so much about. I leave you not with a conclusion as an invitation.

What follows is a quiet reflection on God, Jesus the Messiah/Christ, and the movement of the Holy Spirit in your heart. Please take the time you need, remove any distractions from your thoughts, and let God speak to you through these words and prayers from the OSL Lukan Liturgy of Word and Table. Then, note what God is saying to you and what follow-up actions and activities are needed.

**A time of meditation and reflection guided by Prayers from
“A Lukan Liturgy of Word and Table.”**

Please read slowly and deliberately, especially the underlined (emphasis added) sections.

...pausing after any especially significant phrase.... and at the end of each prayer.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

The Holy One be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

Beginning and End of all things,
we bless you for the present that is ever yielding
to your new heaven and new earth.

We offer you our praise for all the means of grace
and or every prompting of your Spirit,
calling us to spurn sin and open ourselves
to your presence and purpose.

Merciful God,

Here our prayer...

CONFESSION AND PARDON

...Loving and merciful God,
we offer you all our personal and corporate sins,
and those offenses in which we are complicit,
knowingly and unknowingly.

- silent confession- (take as much time as needed.)

Merciful God,

consume our sins with the fire of your love.

Remove all the stains of sin,
and through your grace, restore us mercifully with your kiss of peace.
We offer you all that is good in us,
in order that you may amend and sanctify it,
perfecting it more and more,
that we may live faithfully in your loving presence

[Thomas a Kempis, 15th C.,]

Lord, have mercy.

Christ have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Hear the good news: In the name of Jesus Christ, through God's boundless
love you are forgiven in good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over!
In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven! Glory to God! Amen!

THE PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you all!

And also with you.¹⁵

¹⁵ “A Lukan Liturgy of Word and Table”, The Book of Offices and Services of the Order of Saint Luke (Fourth Edition) @ 2023, Pg. 7-9

Appendix I

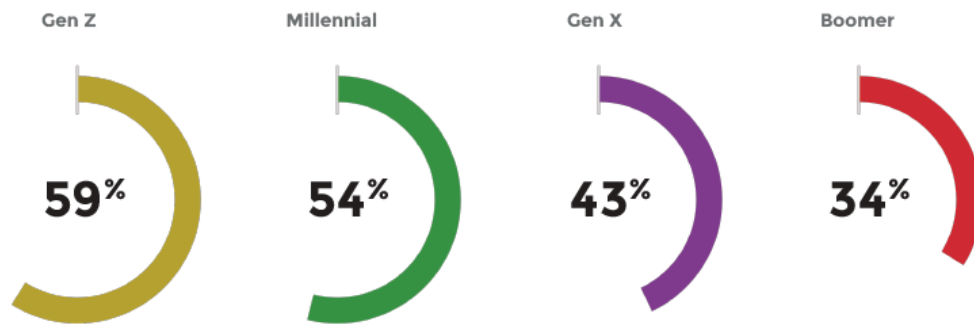
- I. We are in a time of significant change and transformation, confusion and concern.

A tsunami of multiple changes has swept over us in the last 50-60 years.

- Social, Technological, Economic, and Environmental
- Growing Isolation, “Epidemic of Loneliness”, Identity Concerns, and eroded Trust
- Relationships and Community have crumbled in Work, Family, Civic groups, and Personally.
- Decline in church attendance, struggle for church survival made worse by Covid19
- Yet, there are signs of growing interest in Spiritual Connections and church again.

Spiritual Openness is Rising

% of U.S. adults who say, “I am more open to God today than I was before the pandemic.”



n=2,000 U.S. adults, October 21-31, 2022.

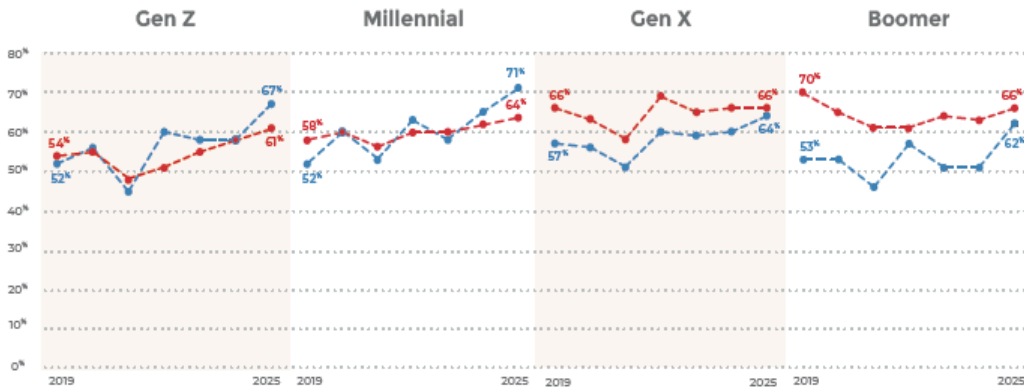
Note: Generation names are based on when members of that generation become adults (18-21).

Generations	Born	Current Ages
Gen Z	1997 – 2012	13 – 28
Millennials	1981 – 1996	29 – 44
Gen X	1965 – 1980	45 – 60
Boomers II (a/k/a Generation Jones)*	1955 – 1964	61 – 70
Boomers I*	1946 – 1954	71 – 79
Post War	1928 – 1945	80 – 97
WWII	1922 – 1927	98 – 103

The Next Generation Is Leading the Way

% of U.S. adults by generation who say, "I have made a personal commitment to follow Jesus that is still important in my life today."

● Men ● Women



n=35,788 interviews with U.S. adults of generations shown, January 2019-February 2025.

Young people, especially young men, are making personal commitments to Jesus at a remarkable rate. This challenges the common idea that the next generation has walked away from faith. In reality, many are waking up to it.

especially the mainline churches, is ill-prepared to respond, and the clergy and lay leaders are often exhausted from the demands of the COVID-19 epidemic and church administration.

3. How do we even begin conversations with younger people turned off by Church talk and actions?

2. Yet the church,

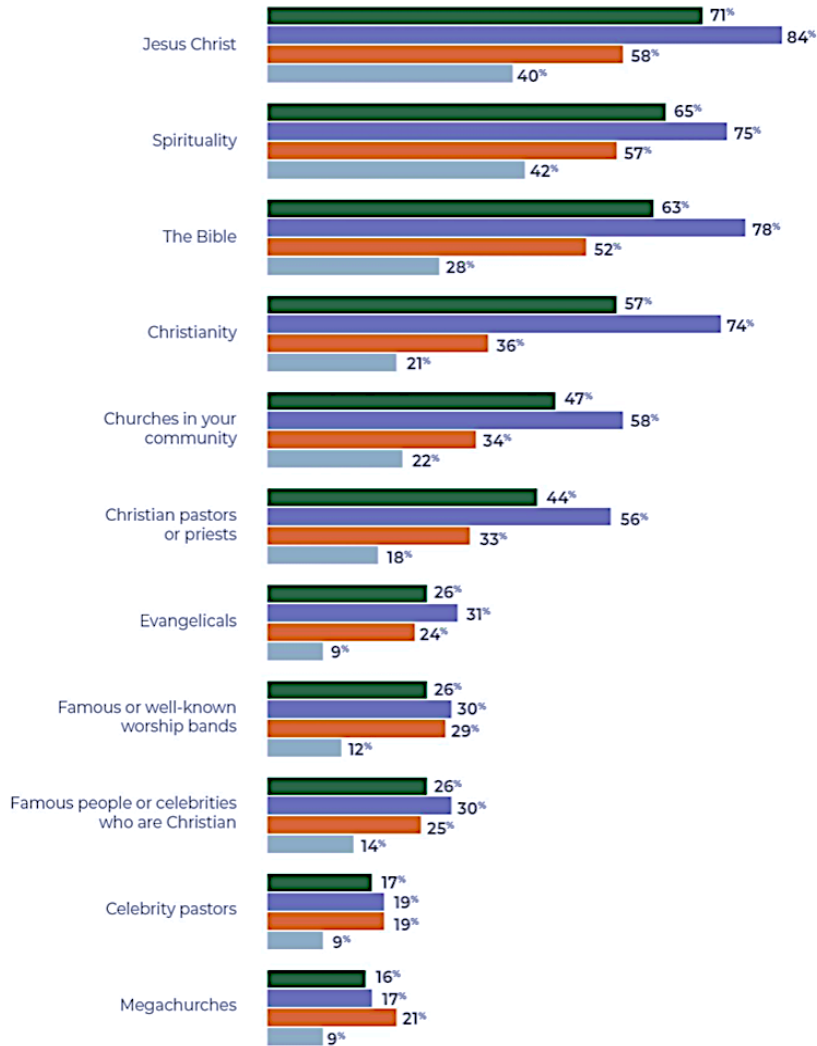
Americans Like Jesus & His Message ... but not so much his messengers

Barna

Would you say that you, personally, have a positive or negative opinion of each of the following?

Base: general population ages 13+; % have a "positive" opinion

● Total ● Christian ● Other faith ● No faith



Source: Barna Group
n=2,005 U.S. teens & adults, December 13–22, 2022.

Beyond Jesus, when it comes to views of other Christian groups or entities, positive opinions wane. People of no faith are neutral or leaning negative—and for celebrity, mega- or famous representatives of the faith, opinions are decidedly negative.

The

Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

Mark 1:14-15

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and **the kingdom of God** has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Matt 4:13-17

¹³ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴ so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

¹⁵ “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the gentiles—
¹⁶ the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.”

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for **the kingdom of heaven** has come near.”

Luke 4:16-21

¹⁴ Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “**Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**” (...for all the poor, all the captives)

John 1:1-18

(Plus John 1:19-20, 22, 29)

¹⁹ “This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but he confessed, “I am not the Messiah.”^[a] ... ²² Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” ²³ He said,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ ” as the prophet Isaiah said...

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is **the Lamb of God** who takes away the sin of the world!”