

# Research on How God Transforms Lives Reveals a 10-Stop Journey

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**S**ix years after beginning what he assumed would be a relatively typical research process that sought to better understand how God transforms people's lives, researcher George Barna discovered that he had tackled a deeply challenging and amazingly revealing journey. The product of his effort was the ability to identify some of the developmental processes, experiences, and obstacles that are common across the lives of Americans of all backgrounds. He contends that while the details of people's developmental story differ, everyone is on a spiritual journey and there is sufficient similarity in those journeys that we can describe a normative life path – a map that can help people make greater progress if their goal is to become more Christ-like.

Using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, including more than 15,000 telephone surveys, George Barna distilled his findings and conclusions in a book, ***Maximum Faith: Live Like Jesus***, that he hopes will motivate and enable Christians in the United States to re-imagine the goal and methods related to their faith journey.

“It's no wonder that this was probably the most challenging research project I've ever undertaken. If applied, the outcomes could significantly boost the transformational quotient of most people's lives and enable them to experience God and life in startlingly new and exciting ways. But as substantial as the benefits of the journey are, the obstacles to experiencing those benefits are enormous. Genuine transformation requires a long-term commitment, a solid partnership with God, the willingness to grow through pain and hardship, and the willingness to live a countercultural life.”

Discussing the new book and some of the research behind the conclusions, George Barna brought to light a number of insights about the transformational journey that Christians experience.

### **Nature of the Journey**

Looking at transformation as the process that enables us to gradually die to sin, self, and society in order to fully and profoundly love God and people, Barna explained that Jesus Himself defined the destination of the journey when He taught His followers that the most important exhortations from God were to love God and people with all of their heart, mind, strength, and soul (Mark 12:30-31). Paul, one of the classic examples of a transformed person, underscored the necessity of this quest when he said that the only thing that matters is being transformed by God into a new creation (Galatians 6:15). Transformation, then, is the effort to become holy by fully submitting to God and consistently pursuing His will – being set apart by the blood of Christ to experience a unique freedom and a new identity through the power of that blood and the enduring guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Knowing the purpose of the journey is critical. “You’re not likely to experience full transformation if you don’t know what it is and are not devoted to its pursuit,” Barna cautioned. “Most Christians mirror cultural goals, desiring happiness, comfort, security, belonging, and popularity. Surprisingly few are focused on completely cooperating with God to experience the kind of whole-life transformation described in the Bible and made possible only through a partnership with God. The lack of understanding of the goals of a truly Christian life prevents people from making the extraordinary life transition that are possible.”

Every person is on a spiritual journey of some sort. The value of the new research, according to Barna, is that most people who consider themselves to be Christian, regardless of their level of spiritual maturity, are entangled in more of a circular journey than a consistently progressive route. While the journey orchestrated by God is not always strictly linear, it has discernible destination points along the way, and a clearly identifiable end point that followers of Christ may partner with the Holy Spirit to reach before they die. It seems inevitable, based on the research, that people will encounter the frustration of regressing along the way.

“It is natural, although irritating, for people to take a step or two forward only to then lose ground. Depending upon their commitment, they may regain that ground or lose it permanently. Transformation is like a tug of war, where an individual has periods of sustained progress followed by periods of dramatic retreat to levels of lesser maturity and capability. How a person handles each period of regression determines their transformational potential.”

While God-driven transformation is more common among people who are engaged in church life than among those who are not, neither the length of time involved with churches nor the amount of hours devoted to church-oriented activities bears much of a correlation to transformational progress. Barna stated, “you can be the Church Lady and yet be no farther along the journey than Richard Dawkins. Simply attending church activities and classes does not guarantee or necessarily enhance one’s transformational experience. Wholeness requires more than simply showing up and gorging on the religious-activities menu.” The study found that some people reach the ultimate stages of wholeness and maturity within just a couple of decades while others failed to achieve such maturity after more than five decades of consistent religious activity and positive intent.

### **Stops on the Journey**

The transformation journey has ten stops en route to wholeness and freedom. Most Americans, according to the research, never get beyond stop three (awareness and concern about sin and its effects, but not cooperating with Christ to alleviate that problem). Among those who become “born again Christians,” most never move past stop five (i.e., having invited Christ to be their savior and then engaging in a lot of religious activity). In other words, a majority of the American public never reaches the second half of the stops on the journey to wholeness. Barna also determined that most church programs are designed to help people get to stop five of the journey but not to move farther down the road to Christ-likeness.

The single most challenging stop is what Barna identified as “stop 7, which is that of brokenness.” The researcher indicated that in order to move closer to completion of the journey, a person must be broken of three things: sin, self, and society. He noted that America’s culture serves as a strong barrier to people being willing to completely abandon themselves and the world in favor of listening to, obeying and enjoying God.

Barna also pointed out that a biblical pattern of spiritual development would require brokenness prior to a person becoming “born again,” but that Americans typically follow a different ordering of the experiences than that identified in the scriptures. That re-ordering is responsible for the prolonged time it takes to make real spiritual progress.

### **Transformation by the Numbers**

Armed with numerous insights from the research, Barna mentioned a few of the statistics included in the book that place some of these perspectives in context. For instance, while more than two-thirds of Americans say they are either “religious” or “spiritual,” they admit to not being deeply committed to faith matters. Fewer than one in five (18%) claims to be “totally committed” to engaging in personal spiritual development. Further evidence shows that among adults who claim to be Christian, just one out of every seven (14%) say that their faith in and relationship with God is the highest priority in their life.

While four out of five adults say they are Christian, only one out of five (20%) contends that the single, most important decision they have ever made was to invite Jesus Christ to forgive them and become their savior.

Driven by social mores, few adults who believe they are Christian are willing to abandon worldly objectives in favor of seeking godliness. Only one out of five (22%) stated that they live in a way which makes them completely dependent upon God – and follow up research, according to Barna, indicates that such dependence only emerges in times of crisis or suffering.

Emphasizing that “you get what you measure” – that is, you evaluate yourself in areas that you believe are important and generally ignore the rest – Barna asserted that neither churches nor individuals usually have measurement criteria for spiritual development that reflect the outcomes promoted by Jesus. Citing “tangible fruit” as a more desirable outcome than the factors often measured – such as attendance, giving, program completion, or even Bible knowledge – he suggested that Christians and communities of faith reconsider how they determine “success” and “maturity” in light of what the research has shown to be the characteristics of those who have reached the latter stops on the journey and exhibit more substantial evidence of holistic life transformation.

The ***Maximum Faith*** research not only described the ten stops on the transformation journey, but also the percentage of adults parked at each stop. Less than two percent of the public has reached either of the final two stops on the journey.

### **Multi-Dimensional Growth**

Focusing on Jesus’s exhortation that His followers must love both God and people with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength, Barna noted that transformed individuals are those who have aligned their intellect, emotions, behavior, and spirit with the call and ways of God. In other words, genuine, Christ-driven transformation is four-dimensional. Noting that most adults interact with the world primarily through one of those four dimensions, the reluctance or failure to allow God to master them in the other three dimensions often retards faster development and greater spiritual depth.

The research also showed that people are transformed through a combination of experiences, knowledge, and relationships. The absence of any one of those components can also inhibit a person’s growth.

“An individual cannot transform himself, nor can a church transform a person. That work can only be done by God, through the empowerment and direction of the Holy Spirit. But God is eager to partner with those who will cooperate with Him. Understanding what God seeks to do in our lives is a critical step toward not becoming seduced and sidetracked by

mere religious activity. The richness of the journey is found in the experience of progressing through the challenges of the process in the company of God.”

### **About the Barna Group**

Barna Group (which includes its research division, the Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization that conducts primary research, produces media resources pertaining to spiritual development, and facilitates the healthy spiritual growth of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries. Located in Ventura, California, Barna has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984.

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